

# cineACTION

ISSUE 84 2011

**Robin Wood:  
In Celebration  
Chabrol  
Hawks  
Hitchcock  
Penn  
Romero**



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# Issue 84

## Editorial 1

THE ORIGINAL ROBIN WOOD  
PERSONAL NOTES

## Beyond the Male Gaze 13

DEPARTURES FROM SCOTTIE'S  
POINT OF VIEW IN *VERTIGO*  
by James Zborowski

## Normality is Threatened by the Monster 24

ROBIN WOOD, ROMERO AND ZOMBIES  
by Lucy Fife Donaldson

## The Literary Critic, the Nineteenth Century Novel and *The Wire* 32

by Garry Watson

## Remembering 41

ARTHUR PENN  
by Richard Lippe

CLAUDE CHABROL  
by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe

## Britton on Film 44

THE COMPLETE FILM CRITICISM  
OF ANDREW BRITTON  
by James MacDowell

## Kim Novak 50

FIVE FILMS  
by Richard Lippe

## Encountering *The Thing From Another World* 56

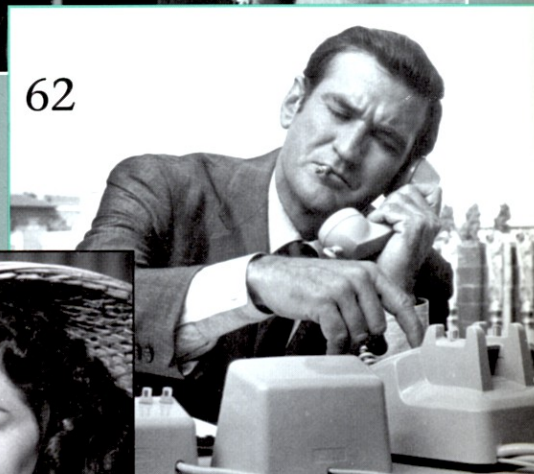
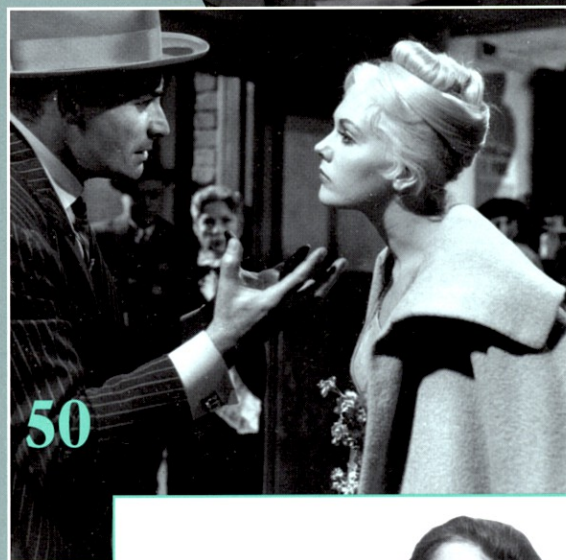
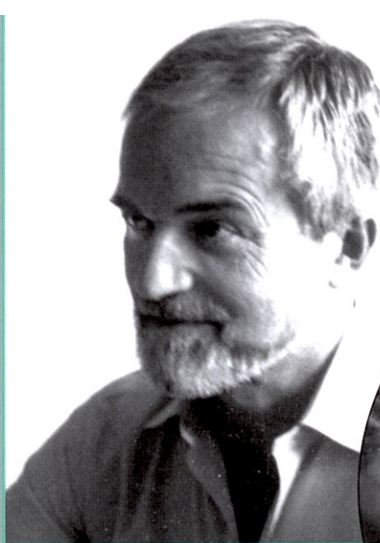
by Tony Williams

## Antonioni Orgy 62

by George Porcari

## Obituary 70

JANE RUSSELL  
FARLEY GRANGER  
PATRICIA NEAL  
TONY CURTIS  
by Florence Jacobowitz  
and Richard Lippe



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# THE ORIGINAL ROBIN WOOD

This issue celebrates Robin Wood's remarkable contribution to film criticism. Robin established himself as an important critic in the sixties and wrote steadily until a year before he died in 2009. His career is marked significantly by the tumultuous social and political changes that affected his professional and personal life. Robin's criticism is often described in terms of a simplistic bifurcation: first there was the humanist critic and then the politicized one. Arguably, the work was grounded, from his earliest writings, in an engagement with the social world and already evidenced a moral and political consciousness. Robin's writing was influenced by the utopian possibilities of the social liberation movements of the sixties and the reactionary politics that followed, ending the hope of revolutionary change. The latter led to his interest in the films of such diverse directors as Gregg Araki, Patrice Chéreau and Michael Haneke, each of whom directly speaks of social oppression and its results and consequences.

Robin remained consistent in his adherence to the significance of the author/director as a prime creative presence responsible for the work and the importance of style as the cinema's means of communicating ideas and meaning. He was well aware of the collaborative nature of mainstream film production (as shown in his affection for the work of Howard Hawks, Leo McCarey and Jean Renoir, directors who were known to encourage collaboration and improvisation) but saw the director's contribution as giving the film a defined vision. Robin was attracted to films that evidenced a strong directorial signature long past the time it was considered by film scholarship acceptable or relevant to do so. His commitment to his convictions alienated him from the reigning critical discourses of the moment with their extreme, almost pathological, rejection of intentionality following "the death of the author". The approach to art that forced individual works within an ideological system that produced sameness was antithetical to Robin's appreciation of the intervention of the artist and the possibility of using art to effect social change. The recognition of authorship supported the idea that not all works are created equally or are of equal value.

Robin's commitment to the strong imprint of the director is found also in his love of distinguished works of literature and classical music. In his monograph on *The Wings of the Dove*, he describes great literature as "the greatness of which resides in the writer's grasp of the potentialities of language—movement from word to word, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph...."<sup>1</sup> Aside from the recognition of the artist's use of style and the medium, this again suggests that his critical practice had an evaluative component—some works are greater than others.

Robin's steadfast critical appreciation of Yasujiro Ozu demonstrates the strengths of his sensitivity to issues like aging (*Tokyo Story*) and loss (*Late Spring*) just as his love for Hawks was attributable to the director's concerns with equality in the personal and professional world. These filmmakers were embraced by Robin in the way their work spoke about 'life'. This is not meant to restrict Robin to the influence of F. R. Leavis, but to suggest that his valuation of the great works of directors such as Ozu and Hawks remained a potent and valuable component in his critical practice, that accounted for its breadth beyond the more overtly politicized criticism.

While we understand the privileging of the writings on the horror film, we would be saddened to see it taken as definitive of Robin's work, or representative of his most significant contribution to film criticism. His perceptive thesis that the horror film can be read as a radical critique of late capitalist culture in which it proliferated is extremely relevant, but with the exception of the work of George Romero, the films were not those that he continued particularly to value. It is also important to note that Robin's reading of the 70's horror film was shaped by past writing—his appreciation of German Expressionism, F.W. Murnau, as well as his reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, his first published work as a film critic.

Robin's career was established in criticism and remained there. His success as a critic is evidenced by the deeply-felt response of readers to his writing which remains accessible without sacrificing complexity or intellectual rigour. Robin spoke directly to his readers and his style invites the reader to engage with him. His criticism opens up a space for the reader to participate and share in the process of evaluation, most importantly allowing for the freedom of argument and dissent. Like André Bazin, Robin's criticism is most often supported by his genuine admiration and love of the films he chose to write about. It encourages the reader to articulate her/his own emotional responses within a context that invites further thinking. This



is what a good critic does—Robin foregrounds the value of art to his life and gave one the courage to understand the significance of a work to one's own life. "Why take Hitchcock seriously?" opened up this kind of discussion. In some ways his greatest contribution might be to challenge the continuing uncertainty of whether the cinema (and especially classical Hollywood) deserves to be taken seriously, a dilemma which remains unresolved.

*CineAction* was founded as a journal which would welcome close readings, specifically of narrative entertainment film. It has expanded its range of concerns since its inception, but Robin's contribution to this distinctive characteristic of the magazine is invaluable and helps secure its identity as a journal open to evaluative critical practice.

We were pleased with the response to the call for papers for this tribute issue to Robin Wood, but space limitations prevented us from including a number of these submissions in this issue. We look forward to publishing them at a later date.  
— Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe

#### Note

1 Wood, Robin, *The Wings of the Dove* (London: BFI, 1997) p.7.

#### Robin Wood Bibliography

##### BOOKS CURRENTLY IN PRINT

*Howard Hawks* (1968)

*Personal Views* (1976)

*Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986)

*Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (1989)

*Sexual Politics and Narrative Film* (1998)

*Wings of the Dove* (1999)

*Rio Bravo* (2003)

Forthcoming: *Ingmar Bergman* (2012)

## ISSUE 86

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

#### FUTURES OF CINEMA

Not long ago critics and scholars were lamenting the 'end of cinema.' Apparently the obituaries were premature but the future of cinema is still uncertain. Contributions on the state of cinema and its possible futures; the ongoing impact of digital technologies; the aesthetics of cinema in a multi-mediascape; the future of national cinemas amidst relentless corporate globalization; the future of political filmmaking in this cinematic future.

#### CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION

The future of Canadian cinema is always precarious. Critical and historical analysis of Canadian films and television.

Submissions in hard copy to:

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A style guide is available on our website [www.cineaction.ca](http://www.cineaction.ca)

**Deadline: September 1, 2011**

## FROM THE COLLECTIVE

## Personal Notes

**I first met Robin in 1972.** It was in Madison, Wisconsin, and he was visiting the university to give several lectures. In 1978 we began living together and from then on our lives were interconnected on the personal and professional level. We both taught film study at York University, Toronto. After programming 'The American Nightmare' together for the Toronto International Film Festival in 1979, during the early 80's we each wrote short films reviews for two local papers, *The Body Politic* and *The Clarion*. Robin was contributing to *Movie* and I also wrote for the magazine. In 1985, in frustration over the academic emphasis on theory at the expense of criticism, Florence, Robin and I decided to begin a film magazine that would eventually materialize as *CineAction*.

Robin and I had similar taste in film and we watched a lot of movies. The experience led to many productive discussions, the sharing and extending of ideas, and was one of the pleasures of our being together. In working on a project of our own, we each gave the other support. Also, it was because of Robin that I got to meet and eventually become a close friend of Andrew Britton who stayed with us frequently during the 80's.

Robin's daily existence involved a number of constants: writing, listening to classical music and reading, often classical literature although his literary tastes were wide ranging. During the 80's, he was fascinated by feminist orientated detective novels; these novels in part inspired him to try to fulfil his longstanding ambition to be a successful writer of popular fiction.

Although Robin was fully aware of his reputation as a film critic and proud of some of his accomplishments, he never wanted to be treated as a special person. He had no interest in building a cult-like identity based on his work and presence. Robin lived in the everyday world and wanted to be, or thought of himself as being, an 'ordinary' person.

In truth, as a person and a critic, Robin was very much an 'original' and, as such, cannot be replaced.

—Richard Lippe

**I met Robin as a student** in the very first course he taught at York University, one entitled Film and Education. Robin decided that meant open to interpretation and began the first class by showing extracts from Ozu and Mizoguchi films and asking the class what they noticed. The fact that I remember that so clearly speaks to the impression it left. Robin was on the one hand reserved, almost shy, yet he could exude a warmth and charm that was endearing. Robin was a study in contradiction: he railed against the nuclear family and wept at the back of the classroom at the conclusion of screenings of films such as *Make Way for Tomorrow*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* or *Tokyo Story*. I was touched that such an obviously brilliant teacher could also be nervous in front of a class and struggle with a stutter (a problem that gradually diminished and disappeared).

My favorite examples of Robin Wood criticism, the essays



that changed my perception, offering a whole new way of looking and thinking are those centred on the woman's position, in *Blond Venus*, the Ingrid Bergman films, the cinema of Max Ophüls, *Late Spring*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, *Sisters of the Gion*, *My Love Burns*, *Flowers of Shanghai*, Chéreau's *Gabrielle* to name a few. Although the 'political' Robin today is better known for his analysis of the horror film in relation to the crisis in confidence in social values in the 70's, the 'political' Robin I knew loved the freedom and anarchy and critique of dominant culture celebrated in screwball comedies (particularly Hawks' or McCarey's). He never tired of *Monkey Business*, *The Awful Truth* or *Bringing Up Baby*.

I always felt Robin was undervalued in Toronto, isolated for his serious commitment to popular Hollywood cinema and his refusal to follow the fashion of traditional scholarship and force a film to suit the theoretical position *du jour*. Robin remained true to his convictions and never underestimated the potentialities of classical style. He also had an eye for talented directors beyond Hollywood and early on in their careers, championed films by Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, Patrice Chéreau, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Michael Haneke, amongst others. Most importantly Robin valued the films he elucidated, and that passion and affection shine in his best work. Robin stimulated you to be your best, to sharpen your critical perceptions and engage in a discourse that validated the pleasure experienced from a film that moves you.

—Florence Jacobowitz

**After teaching art in a high school** for 10 years, I realized that I needed an intellectual challenge. So I enrolled in a film studies course at York University taught, in the evening, by Robin Wood. A life-long film fan, I was familiar with Robin's writing through *Film Comment*, and had been overjoyed to discover that he taught at York University in my hometown of Toronto. The class was large...there must have been 200 students in it, and consisted, as I was soon to discover, mostly of arts students trying to get what they thought would be an easy credit. An introduction to Hollywood cinema, the course was anything but 'easy' if one was willing to engage in the material being covered. Robin was an outstanding teacher: lucid, knowledgeable, insightful and patient. That was it for me. I couldn't get enough of it, and directly proceeded to enroll in a summer course with Robin on directors, if I remember clearly, running the gamut from Alfred Hitchcock to Larry Cohen. Robin's reading lists gave me an entry into the theory that had been missing from my late 60s university education and opened my eyes and mind to the pleasures of film as a socially-engaged art form. I found myself welcomed into his inner circle of colleagues and students, and when the idea of starting a film journal presented itself, I was amongst the founding members. Twenty-six years later, Robin is gone, but the journal continues as an homage to his influence and ideas.

—Susan Morrison

**This issue in celebration** of Robin's enormous contribution to film criticism is a great pleasure to see. Robin was my friend, teacher and colleague for over 25 years. I know his impact on generations of students. He is sorely missed but his work remains with me in all my study and enjoyment of films. As so many have said, when Robin offered his interpretation of a film, it was impossible not to see that film through his wonderfully perceptive eyes from then on. I still think of his critical take on countless old favourites and look at contemporary films with the memory of his always original, always radical, always passionate voice.

—Scott Forsyth



Robin Wood



## FILMS THAT ROBIN PARTICULARLY VALUED

*Code Inconnu* (2000) Michael Haneke became central to Robin's concept of a contemporary progressive filmmaker. He considered *Code Inconnu* Haneke's best film.



*Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948) Robin had a great affection for Max Ophüls' films. He admired *Letter* for its graceful mise-en-scène, the film's complex narrative structure and the irony and compassion Ophüls brought to the material.



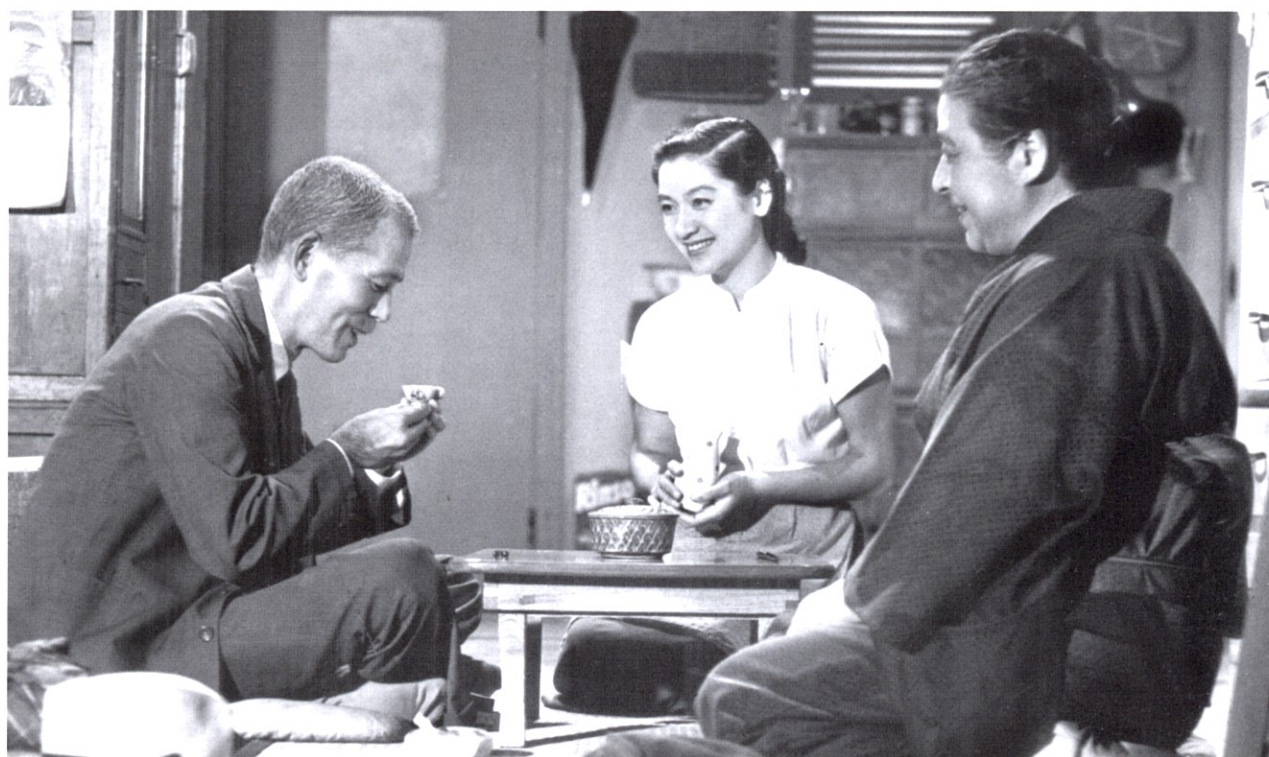


BELOW: *Heaven's Gate* (1980) Robin considered Michael Cimino's film as being 'among the supreme achievements of the Hollywood cinema', both stylistically and in its elegiac vision of the loss of democracy in America.

BACK COVER: *The Rules of the Game* (1939) Jean Renoir was a director who Robin greatly valued as a stylist and a social critic; particularly for his complex presentation of class and sex-gender relations in this film.



*Tokyo Story* (1953) Robin's admiration for Yasujiro Ozu involved the director's eloquent means of expressing his humanity. See Robin's article 'Resistance to Definition: Ozu's "Noriko" Trilogy', *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, (New York: Columbia, 1998).





# REMEMBERING ROBIN

by PETER HARCOURT

I can't remember when I first met Robin. It was probably back in the early 1960s, after I had joined the Education Department of the British Film Institute. Robin was beginning to write a series of monographs on a variety of filmmakers and, through the facilities of the BFI, I was in a position to lay on screenings for him—not that he really needed them.

From the outset, Robin was exceptional in the amount of information he could receive from a single screening of a film—far more than I could do from six. At the same time, he didn't seem to notice—or didn't care—if the film was in black-&-white or colour, or in standard aspect ratio or cinemascope! What he was doing when watching a film was extracting a moral fillet. That was his great strength, it seemed to me: he went for the moral centre of the films he engaged with.

Robin and I had had much the same training. We were both products of the Cambridge School of English and of the incisively moral mind of F.R. Leavis. Leavis celebrated those authors who demonstrated a "firm grasp of the particular" and extolled a humanist attention to psychological realism. Indeed, Robin's work has always involved an intimate examination of the details of any film he was exploring, while requiring, however, a dimension of realism with which he could engage. *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), for instance, or the films of Jerry Lewis would be left to more *outré* expositors!

So back in the 1960s, there were screenings and lunches and endlessly insightful talk about cinema. Robin truly amazed me by the details he could retain and with the moral orderings that he could find in films which, at that time, I might have felt scarcely worthy of such attention. Ingmar Bergman, yes; but Alfred Hitchcock and—Heaven help us!—Howard Hawks? I had a lot to learn.

But culturally, those were heady times. Everything about film was in the process of expanding. Spurred on by new technologies, a true renaissance was taking place in film production around the world. Although Robin didn't much care about the new cinemas that were emerging from, say, the previously invisible cultures of Latin America or Canada, the work he was doing on largely the Hollywood product was all part of the burgeoning excitement of the times.

Although we had benefited from much the same education, we came at it from very different cultural spaces. Robin had received a classical British education, entailing great literacy along with a fine appreciation of classical music. At Cambridge he was associated with Jesus College, equally an established upper middle-class institution. I, on the other hand, had gone to Etobicoke High School, long before it was even a collegiate! There were neither books nor music in my home, except for the Hit Parade tunes which my mother liked to listen to on the radio, rendered by Guy Lombardo if possible. And I was a fledgling jazz-band trumpet player.

With that cultural background, how I ever got to Cambridge is another story; but suffice to say that when Robin and I were viewing films together in the early 1960s, I couldn't believe that

in comedies such as *Secrets of Women* (1952) or *A Lesson in Love* (1954), a great *réalisateur* such as Ingmar Bergman could possibly have been influenced by a mere *confectionneur* such as George Cukor. I was wrong, of course; but while I was self-consciously in pursuit of the "high culture" which Robin had been raised within, he could see in the "vulgarity" of the Hollywood product a release from that same culture—a release which, arguably, in later years, would become part of his coming out as a homosexual.

In fact, if I may be allowed to do so, I might suggest that there are two distinct phases in the critical practice of Robin Wood—Before Coming Out (BCO) and After Coming Out (ACO). BCO, for all his brilliance, Robin was still working within the Great Tradition of bourgeois humanism—a tradition confirmed by the title of one of Leavis's books. At this time of his life, his achievement consisted of bringing to the study of popular movies the same level of seriousness that literary critics traditionally brought to the great works of literature. Geoff Pevere has told me how revolutionary Robin's *Hitchcock's Films* (1965) was for him personally as a young man, empowering him to write about the films he loved in a totally serious way. At this stage of his life, BCO, Robin's great contribution consisted, in ways far more extensive than what Robert Warshaw could have imagined in *The Immediate Experience* (1962) of his ability "to take all this nonsense seriously."

ACO, however, Robin discovered a more confrontational voice. Feminist film theory assisted him in railing against the oppressions of a patriarchal society and in doing so, to reposition himself oppositionally within his own discourse as a homosexual male. He discovered what he could feel was a radical politics. The great works of this period, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986) and *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (1998) register this serious change of focus. But *Hitchcock's Films* continued to be re-issued as a must-read for every new generation of students, each with a more extended and self-interpretive introduction.

Ironically, I was always in a position of patronage towards Robin, although I hope never in a patronizing way. After I had returned to Canada to establish a film program at Queen's University in Kingston, the first appointment I made was, of course, Robin Wood. With his eclectic literacy and passion for film, Robin was much appreciated by the entire university. When the initial chaos of his coming out drove his wife and their three children back to England, Robin accepted a job at Warwick University in Coventry so that he could be nearer his kids. But his companion at that time who had worked in film distribution had nothing to do in Coventry so that, when a position opened up in the late 1970s at York University in Toronto, I contrived to bring him back once again to Canada. Shortly after that, however, I moved to Ottawa, and socially Robin and I began to drift apart.

But we continued to have our quarrels. I would get annoyed at some of the more pompous assertions he would make in *CineAction!*, especially if related to Canadian film; and—our latest, indeed our *last* quarrel—involved our differing evaluations of the films of Michael Haneke. Except for the more restrained *Code inconnu* (2000) or the eerily prescient *Das weiße Band* (2009), I've often felt that in films such as *Funny Games* (1997 or 2007) or even *Caché* (2009), Haneke is exploiting a sadistic relationship



with his audience. Robin would disagree. We would quarrel about the nature of evil. And so our arguments would continue—arguments which now are no more.

Robin Wood is undoubtedly the most challenging film critic in English. Although with *The American Cinema* (1968) Andrew Sarris made an explosive mark on films criticism and his quarrels with Pauline Kael were productively legendary, Robin has outlasted both of them. Like F.R. Leavis eschewing scholarship, he has worked like a spider, spinning his complex critical constructions out of his own innards. To read Robin has always been to enter into an intimate relationship between himself and the work at hand, always with moral references to the social world as he understood it. And if some of us might understand it differently, this disagreement formed the stuff of serious intellectual debate.

Even if you disagreed with him—perhaps *especially* if you disagreed with him—to argue with Robin Wood was always an incentive to think more clearly. And thinking clearly is not only the challenge of criticism: it is the challenge of life. To talk with Robin has always involved a serious discussion of the values of life. Missing Robin, many of us will miss this challenge to live our lives more thoughtfully. Emotionally demanding as a friend, his presence was simultaneously intellectually enriching. Although I scarcely saw him during these past few years, now that he's gone, I miss him enormously. A tone of consistent thoughtfulness has vanished from the world—certainly from the world of film criticism.

## ROBIN WOOD

by BILL MacGILLIVARY

Recently, I had a bit of a realization, one that I quite like. Apart from my family and friends and the social issues we must all consider, there are really only three things that are important to me: 1) The films my partner and I make together; 2) The people we make them with; 3) And the people we make them for.

The first two items are somewhat under our control, at least insofar as the writing, financing and production of any film can be under anyone's control. But the third—the people we make the films for—is a free-for-all and I have been continually surprised since I started making films in the seventies, at the innumerable random, unexpected and sometimes almost irrational responses there have been to some of our films.

One of the most extreme, and in many ways, most beautiful examples of this, has been Robin Wood's response to our 1987 film, *Life Classes*. I believe it was the great Peter Harcourt who brought the film to Robin's attention and, while Peter and others have certainly been generous in critiquing the work, for Robin, it seemed to become an obsession. He has written extensively, passionately and, some have said, even irrationally, about that film. Who am I to argue one way or the other? I'm no academic and confess that other than a visceral, gut response, I have little real understanding of any of the films that I (or anyone else) have made. But Robin certainly did, and I feel fortunate and honoured to have had *Life Classes*

included among his favourite films.

The feature film that followed *Life Classes* was called *The Vacant Lot*. My partner and I eagerly awaited Robin's response. Unfortunately, Robin was devastated, disappointed and I think he even felt betrayed by that work and the people who made it. Being the director, of course I had to take responsibility for whatever failings the film may have had (admittedly it was not one of our best). All the formidable intellectual and emotional energy Robin had brought to bear on his appreciation of *Life Classes*, he used in his slashing of *The Vacant Lot*. As we all know, Robin told it as he saw it.

Some years and several letters later (yes, this was back in the quaint old days of letters, envelopes and stamps), we arranged to meet for the first time in his apartment in Toronto. That meeting was a nerve wracking experience for me.

The following is the opening sequence to a long, sporadic but, for me, very gratifying friendship.

### EXT. CHURCH STREET—DAY

The weather is sultry. Rain has passed. Steam rises from the asphalt. Car tires hiss as they roll along. The community is a pleasantly uncontrolled urban accident; low rise, high rise, angular, curvilinear, passive, aggressive, sublime and profane. And its people, walking comfortably hand in hand or laughing closely together in sidewalk cafes, picking up after pet dogs on the sidewalk or shouting love-lorn obscenities into each other's faces, are the same—a pleasantly uncontrolled urban accident.

Emerging from the dense sidewalk crowd, two people, TERRY and BILL, filmmakers, not from the community, but not uncomfortable within it, are making their way to an appointment. Terry stops, opens her brief case and checks her notebook.

**TERRY:** The next street on the left.

Bill nods slowly and they continue.

### EXT. ALEXANDER STREET—DAY

TERRY and BILL round a corner onto a side-street lined with grand Victoria era trees that guard bland, Sixties era apartment blocks. Large drops of water slowly drip from the millions of overhanging leaves.

They approach one of the first of many balconied buildings along the street. Sunlight washes its wet concrete façade. Somewhere, someone sings an aria.

**TERRY:** Are you ready for this?

Bill shakes his head slowly.

**BILL:** Very, very nervous.

Terry smiles encouragingly as they pull opened the glass door and enter. The door bangs closed. Terry runs her finger along the lines of names and white buttons. And presses. They look at each other anxiously as they wait. And wait.

And then a crackling, hesitant voice, a British accent on the intercom.

**ROBIN:** (O.S.) You have... arrived.

Bill responds nervously.

**BILL:** Hello Robin. Sorry, we're a bit late... held up at



meetings this morning... They look at each other and Bill grimaces—unsure. Suddenly the door buzzes an angry buzz.

**ROBIN:** (O.S.) Come to the seventh floor, turn... left out of the elevator... Richard and I are at the end of the hall. As they pass through the door, they can just hear his slightly stammering voice fading.

**ROBIN:** (O.S.) (CONT'D) I'll be... waiting for you.

#### INT. HALLWAY—DAY

The painted elevator door slides open. TERRY and BILL step out and look to the left. Several dark doors line either side of the dimly lit, yellow-brown hallway. But in contrast, at the halls' far end, bright blue light begins to spill from an opening door. High-lit in the doorway, ROBIN WOOD carefully steps into the dark hall.

In his sixties, white-haired Robin Wood has a tall angular body that looks as if it had been quite athletic. But today he moves with the studied care of an arthritic. Carelessly dressed in a loud, short-sleeve shirt, loose slacks and old sandals, he strokes the lazy dark cat draped in his arms.

As they slowly walk towards him, Robin's large, proud face smiles a shy, welcoming smile and he says in his terse, hesitant way.

**ROBIN:** Come in... please... He calls through the doorway.

**ROBIN:** (CONT'D) Richard?

And as the door begins to close behind them, Robin, perhaps trying to put everyone at ease, laughs gently.

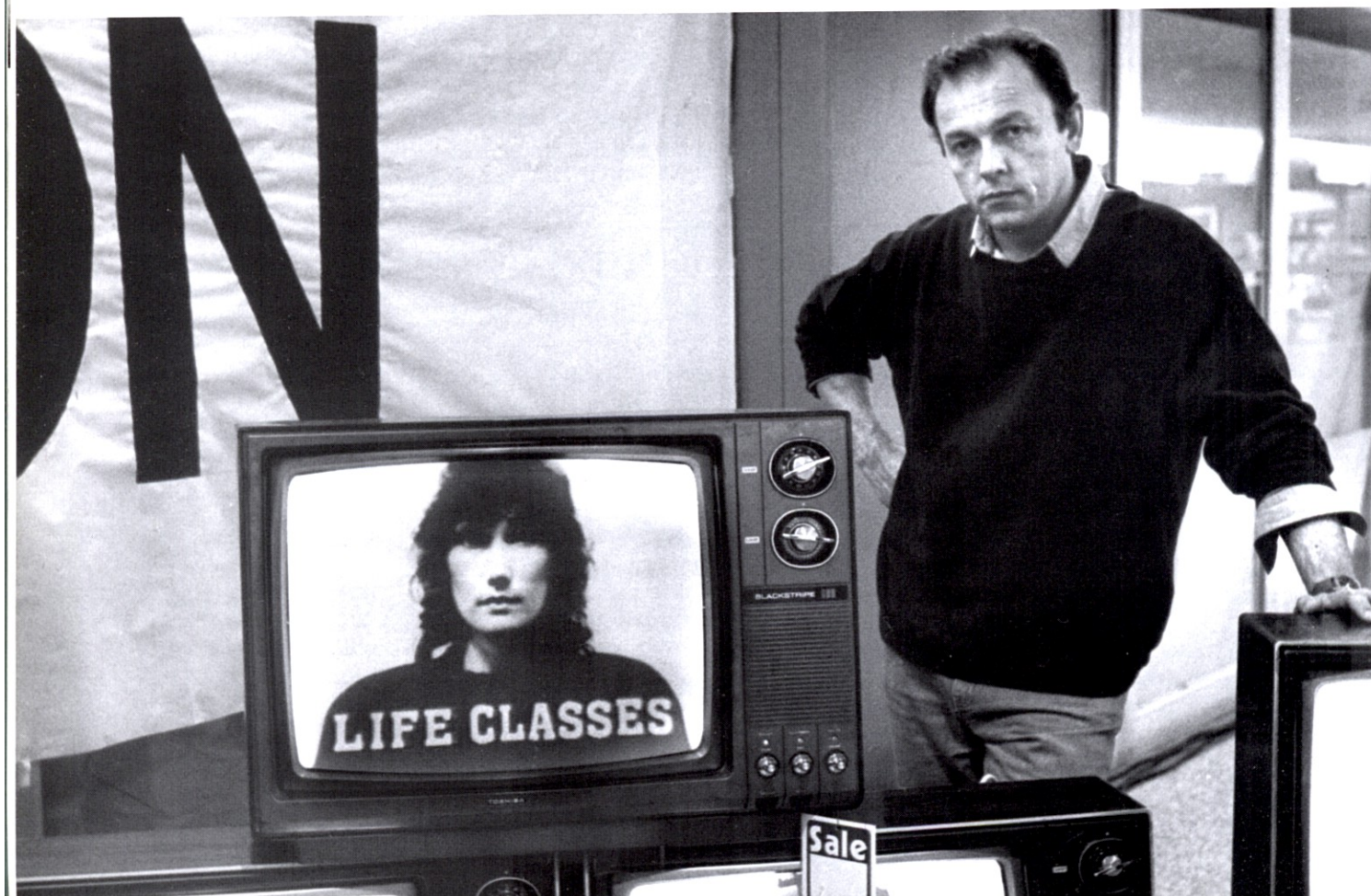
**ROBIN:** (CONT'D) I'm sorry, I'm a little nervous. And the door clicks shut.

Many, many years later, after *Life Classes* had been re-released on a special edition DVD, I arranged to meet with Robin in Toronto. Terry and I knew that all these years he had been watching this film that he loved so much on a very old, probably 'pirated' and very well worn VHS. I knew his troublesome hips had been repaired some time ago, but I was surprised to see him so fit. I presented him with him a sparkling new DVD and over a glass of wine, some cheese, crackers and fruit, we discussed our projects—his writings, my films and inevitably, the sorry state of Canadian 'Cinema'.

Before the day was out, Robin marched me up to his favourite video outlet on Bay Street. He presented the *Life Classes* DVD to the owner and urgently insisted that he agree to purchase at least three copies and position them prominently on the shelves. There was no denying Robin Wood. As we left the store, Robin, smiling and focused, was full of the energy of the moment. And I was just a bit mortified.

A little nervous with each other, as always, Robin and I parted company that day on the corner of Bay and Bloor. We exchanged good-byes, shook hands firmly, embraced awkwardly and promised to stay in touch. I watched him walk away, looking like a man on a mission. He seemed in fine form. I was not aware that he had leukemia.

*Life Classes* (1989) Bill MacGillivray on the set of the opening shot of the film





# LOOKING FOR ROBIN

NOTES ON A COMPLETED PhD PROJECT  
A DECADE LATER

by OLOF HEDLING

During the second part of the 1990s I researched and wrote a PhD thesis at Lund University, Sweden. My topic was the film criticism of Robin Wood. As my investigation got underway I was able to place a number of articles and excerpts in Swedish academic journals. I also gave one or two conference papers on my subject. Besides that, I translated pieces by Robin into Swedish. The work came to an end of sorts as the thesis was published in Swedish as not quite a 300 page book in October 2001 (it went to the printers on 9/11). Its title was *Robin Wood—brittisk filmkritiker (Robin Wood—British Film Critic)* and it had a still from Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1959) on the cover.

On the recommendation of Robin's acquaintance, sometime colleague and occasional promoter Peter Harcourt, I wrote one further piece. It was my first in English and a somewhat feeble attempt to say something about Robin's knotty relationship with Canada, Canadian film and the concept of national cinema, an area not really covered in the thesis. The article was printed in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*.<sup>1</sup>

After the book was published it was, or parts of it were, used on film studies reading lists at several Swedish universities for quite some time (it is long out of print, but I continued to receive requests for permission to make photocopies until last year). Otherwise, I cannot say that it was met with much interest. Frankly, my colleagues at the department of literary studies—where film studies was housed at the time—thought Robin's commitment to André Bazin's notion that Hollywood should be studied because of its 'vitality, and, in a certain sense, the excellence of a tradition' plain ridiculous.

Friends within my own field, on the other hand, tended to see his work as a bit outmoded, non-theoretical and perhaps not quite scholarly. Mainly, he seemed to be thought of as an important person during an early phase in the ever developing evolution of our field. From a practical point of view, the most encouraging thing the book did for me was that it ultimately gained me entry into professional academe and thus a regular income. For various reasons, my research has been focused on quite different topics ever since.

This, however, does not mean that my fascination with Robin's work ended. I did follow him through the late books, the Wayne State University Press re-issues and up until his last essays for *Artforum* and *Film Comment* as well as the reports from the Toronto film festival in *CineAction*. These days, I regularly re-read him. I laugh and marvel at some of his more personal and provocative passages. I have also retained great admiration for his stylistic elegance, for certain of his conceptual thoughts and for his many suggestive critical insights.

Another pleasure has been to detect work that clearly is inspired by Robin's example or would have been impossible without it. For instance, take the introduction to David

Bordwell's *Planet Hong Kong* (2000), a book that has just been revised for a second edition as this is written. Bordwell—always an admirer of Robin and the author of a heartfelt obituary—here maps out what he terms 'the general idea of an aesthetic of popular cinema' and a 'vigorous tradition of mass entertainment' while also speaking plenty about 'craft' and 'refining the tradition'.<sup>2</sup> Instantly, Robin's two pioneering introductions to the Hitchcock and Hawks' book, composed more than three decades earlier when very little of the kind really had been attempted, resonate vibrantly.

## Some kind of friend

Doing research on Robin's writings and career also meant that, in various ways, I came to follow in the footsteps of his life path. Early on, I became familiar with the odd coincidence that he had lived in Sweden during two periods of his life, and that the second of these had actually been spent in Lund, the very place where I lived. He even met his wife there and married her in Lund's town hall, a fact I have later pointed out to several astounded film scholars, principally familiar with Robin as a gay man and critic.

While in Lund, he also formed a lifelong friendship with a Swedish psychiatrist—Göran Persson, a sometime contributor to *CineAction*—whom I spent an extended afternoon with as we spoke about his British friend.<sup>3</sup> Göran sadly passed away before my work's completion. Nonetheless, his widow kindly presented me with his signed copies of most of Robin's books as well as several unpublished early manuscripts (which are still in my possession). An additional aspect of the Swedish connection is that Robin published several translated, original essays in Swedish magazines, although this happened after he had returned to England at the beginning of the 1960s. Moreover, and continuing the Scandinavian association, two of the first published in-depth studies dedicated to explicate and shed light on Robin's work were, oddly enough, written in Denmark in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

I also came to attend the University of Warwick on the geographical margins of Coventry in England for a term. Robin was appointed as the first lecturer in film studies there in 1973 (a post initially sponsored by the BFI for three years in a successful attempt at establishing film studies as an academic subject in Britain). In effect he had the task of setting up the discipline, something he seemed to have done in a productive way, at least judging by the subsequent development. At the time of my stay, in the autumn of 1996, the department had evolved into perhaps the most prominent of its kind in Britain as well as in Europe. Robin's friend from the *Movie* days of the early 1960s, Victor Perkins, still taught there, as did Richard Dyer, another acquaintance. I spoke at length with both of them and have continued to meet Richard on occasion.

During that autumn, besides doing some research in the British Film Institute's (BFI) Reading Room in London, I also took the time to visit Cambridge. I walked around the grounds of Jesus College, where Robin had been a student in the late 1940s and early 50s, and also around those of Downing College where F.R. Leavis had used to be a fellow and Reader. Since I had read a bit about Leavis, I even sought out a semi-detached house in a quite non-descript residential area where the critic, together with his wife Queenie and their children had



spent part of their life (incidentally, this was not far from Leavis' one time friend, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's burial place, a spot I also visited).

After being in a somewhat infrequent correspondence with Robin, I went to New York for the Hitchcock Centennial conference in October 1999 with the aim of meeting him. Robin, a key note speaker at the event, kindly presented me to his partner Richard Lippe as well as to his son Simon who was in town with his wife. We spent an afternoon at the Lincoln Center where a Hou Hsiao-Hsien retrospective was on. We also had dinners in the Village and elsewhere while we also strolled around for a bit in Central Park. In addition, I attempted a rather extended interview about his career and thoughts, something he was somewhat reluctant to participate in.

Nevertheless, we teamed up again soon afterwards as I had the opportunity to invite him back to Lund, a place he had not visited for almost four decades. While here he gave a splendid talk—touchingly, he cried a bit during it—that was perhaps the earliest version of what eventually became the essay on *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997).<sup>5</sup> After this, I continued to meet Robin on both sides of the Atlantic, the last time being in Stockholm in 2006. The occasion was an Ingmar Bergman symposium.

Robin had been invited as one of a select group of international speakers (in effect, the organizer—a Swedish associate—had asked me if Robin was available almost a year earlier). As he showed up, he looked a little bit weary and I sensed that his health was perhaps not at its best. Increasingly less observant of academic etiquette he gave a presentation based on what looked like scribbled notes on small 'scraps' of paper.<sup>6</sup> He illustrated his argument with two clips, the more extended of them not from a Bergman film at all, but rather from Dutch director Marleen Gorris' *Antonia's Line* (1995). The talk—predominantly about Bergman's *The Passion of Anna* (1969)—was balanced and enlightening enough. However, since his views on Bergman had changed a great deal since the book on the director some thirty-five years earlier, his verdict was rather reserved and not particularly enthusiastic. Indeed, the inclusion of the Gorris clip was, as far as I remember, an attempt to illustrate the limits of certain of Bergman's more deterministic ways and views while at the same time contrasting these with a creative outlook with which Robin now was increasingly more in accordance.

That together with the paper scraps, the somewhat impromptu presentation and the very informal clothing, I believe, led to several of the participants voicing disapproval behind his back. As a book from the meeting was published, his contribution was omitted from inclusion. I do not know whether he knew nor cared.

At other times, however, the event had its highlights. Robin was visibly charmed when actress Liv Ullman sought him out for some conversation. When he later told me that she, for one, agreed wholly with his critical assessment of Bergman's work, he smiled slightly with a sort of quiet self-assurance. By coincidence, we also had an informal dinner with the film scholar Thomas Elsaesser—Robin and he slightly knew each other from the BFI, early 1970s London and the National Film Theatre—and some of the other presenters. It was an event that, kind of unlikely, went into the small hours just because there was no end to the noisy conversation and the gossip flying across the

table. The evening remained friendly, unpretentious and simply pleasurable to the end. By that time, I am sure, I had become some kind of friend.

Sadly, for me at least, there would be no more. The next time I went on 'Robin business' was for the commemorative party in his and Richard's apartment in Toronto. Not quite a month had gone by since his passing. It was a memorable night but of course one particular person was sorely missed by each and everyone.

### Why Robin?

I still cannot quite say what the decisive point was behind the choice to do a PhD on Robin Wood or quite why I believed him to be such a key figure. At the time in Sweden, you did not necessarily pick a subject as you were admitted as a candidate. Extensive course work and long lists of required reading filled more than the first year. Essentially, it was during that period that a suitable topic should be decided on. You then had to present something preliminary on the subject. After that, finally, a decision was made whether or not you deserved some of the scarce funding available.

I had read quite a bit of Robin's work as an undergraduate and, for some reason, maintained a fascination with Britain in general and British critical writing in particular; an area in which I, furthermore, considered Robin's work to be a superlative example. Nonetheless, I believe the choice was also much inspired by the environment in which I existed and in which I, without doubt self-servingly, felt a bit marginal.

Hence, I did the thesis at a department primarily dedicated to the study of Swedish literature. In certain ways it was an incredibly conservative and stuffy setting. I was surrounded by fellow candidates and a faculty working on mostly Swedish poetry and prose. Although happily chatting about movies or rock music over a glass of wine in the evening, they were all—at least it seemed so to me—honed to believe in the superiority of the word and in literature, in things like the unproblematic excellence of the twentieth century tradition of modernism and in aesthetic forms untainted by popular acceptance. In a sense, they were brought forth as the future guardians of the Swedish language and as the select few whose responsibility it was to keep the flickering flame of national heritage culture, old and more recent, alive.

This may all seem very far from Robin Wood. But for a devotee of popular cinema and popular art in general, keen to elucidate and discuss film as well as a number of areas and issues suggested by the abovementioned very briefly sketched out hegemony, Robin offered himself as a tool of sorts. To put it in Robin's occasional opponent, friend and editor Peter Wollen's words on Eisenstein, a 'wedge I could use to break open the crust of prejudice and philistinism and hopefully smooth the path for others'.<sup>7</sup>

With his 'Cambridge English' background—or 'English Literature, Life and Thought' as the subject was called—his 'seriousness', the clarity of his prose style and his occasional referring to academic figures such as I. A. Richards, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, Robin seemed to signal a certain standing and nimbus in regard to, not only film, but literary matters as well. This was further enhanced by his recurrent references to W. H. Auden, William Blake, Joseph Conrad, George



Eliot, Shakespeare, D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats as well as his interpretations of Henry James and *Anna Karenina*. The taste in and connoisseur knowledge of classical music and the frequent pondering about it in many of his writings represented another addition in this particular armory (I remember even giving Czech composer Leos Janacek a try because of Robin's repeatedly expressed enthusiasm).

For all his radicalism and all of his divergent views, Robin, in a way, consequently represented a certain tradition and respectability with regard to the world of the arts and humanities as a whole. Or put differently, it took someone casually displaying that kind of cultural capital to move the study of Hollywood cinema into the halls of academia. (I have wondered if that particular property was not also why, to a certain extent, he was chosen for that first Warwick job back in the 1970s). Considering the setting in which I was working, this was an imperative quality.

At the same time, however, Robin's crusade on the part of the movies—and to a certain extent, the popular—was never in question. Additionally he was a great radical thinker who, at least to me, had a vast ability to persuasively argue against established hierarchies and preconceived notions on the relative merit and significance of various forms of artistic expression, being it different types of film or a piece of music compared to a poem.

Take the phrase—"Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?"—and the ensuing discussion that followed, a piece of writing which instantly put Robin on a larger critical map. To me the task was all about how to, against the odds, establish artistic, aesthetic and moral value where there previously was very little, due to snobbish convention, critical negligence and an inability to contextualize various artistic production environments historically. In my opinion Robin succeeded spectacularly and I admired him tremendously for it. It also suited my purposes completely.

Quite early on in my book, I thus, and with a certain provocative pleasure, quoted from a 1960s piece of his from *Movie on Godard*. Clearly inspired by his model Leavis' general argument in *The Great Tradition* (1948), but reinterpreted to suit Robin's own agenda and beliefs, he accordingly stated, 'In the nineteenth century the centre of creative interest shifted from poetry to the novel; in our century it has shifted from the novel to the cinema.'<sup>8</sup> In fact, I liked this suggestion so much so that I included it in the blurb on the back of the book.

Consequently, rather than a sustained single argument about Robin or one specific idea that could be connected to him, the thesis, although presenting a detailed historical chronologic account, was more of a long series of discussions. These concerned topics and issues that Robin's work touched upon or suggested at different times. Moreover, I evidently thought these topics to be very important as I was deeply interested and immersed in them.

Hence, early in my book, I included an extended chapter on the historical rise of English as a topic in higher education. Here, the specific developments and characteristics of the subject as practiced in Cambridge during the first part of the twentieth century were probed in quite some detail. Not least, I attempted to interrogate the presumed moral aura surrounding literature, art and its possible ennobling effects one collectively had

strived to attain in the increasingly secular times of the modern era. Furthermore, there were prolonged discussions on the antagonism between proponents of popular culture versus those of elite art (or 'communal' and 'modern' art in Robin's phrasing), on film and literature, on modernism and mass art, on the breakthrough of theory and ideology within the humanities and on the complex processes of canons and so on. I also gave quite a bit of attention to aspects such as Robin's political use of psychoanalysis and the various developments that meant that he and certain others had been able to establish film as an object for academic study, thus paving the way for the further development among coming generations.

### A Missing Synthesis

As I have read parts in my book to prepare for this account, I found out that I am still quite fond of some of the memories of how I researched, read about and explored a number of these topics and developments. I can also remember the particular enjoyment of, every once in a while, unearthing specific pieces which I previously did not know existed, that Robin never seemed to mention himself and that where not to be found in what bibliographical sources were at my disposal.<sup>9</sup> One such 'discovery' was a string of contributions to London's *The Times Educational Supplement* during the 1970s, which I found by coincidence in a Danish library in a suburb of Copenhagen. Among these articles, I came across, for instance, his first tentative formulation of the theory of horror film, published on the New Years Eve of 1976, and later expanded, revised and made renowned in such works as his and Richard Lippe's *American Nightmare* and in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*.<sup>10</sup>

For all these supposed joys, coupled with the fact that I never lost my enthusiasm for Robin, his work or the various contexts in which it took place and also those I connected it to, I nevertheless feel something unresolved in relation to what I did. Accordingly, I was never able to come up with one grand synthesis or one elaborate summation regarding what Robin's work really represented within the various frameworks I had constructed, sought out and placed his work and career within.

I had filled many pages with notes and observations for this precise purpose. Nonetheless, as the time came to prepare it for print, my mind just went sort of blank at the same time as the clock was ticking and deadlines were to be met. The result was that the final chapter ended up as by far the shortest of the book. It did not really consist of much more than a few repetitions of what had been already concluded in the seven preceding parts. In a sense, I made the old mistake of thinking that a kind of summary was visible for all to see in what already had been said.

Now, I am not sure if Robin's various practices, thoughts and agendas lent themselves very evenly to a grand summation statement. After all, his writings were full of divergent and sometimes conflicting views, crusading polemics and occasional tendencies at iconoclasm. To take just one instance, he repeatedly expressed anti-nationalist sentiments and condemned British culture for being repressive whereas he simultaneously always seemed to retain a particular sort of 'Britishness'.

Accordingly, and within the confines of one single book introduction, he was able to write, on the one hand, 'I feel no commitment to preserving and developing a specifically British culture. My "country" is Marxism, feminism, gay libera-



tion...the major progressive movements of our age'.<sup>11</sup> On the other, and in fact only a few pages earlier, he, however, had noted, and not without a certain pride, 'I am very British, with deep roots in a peculiarly British tradition. The British tradition to which I refer (both creative and critical) might be represented by such figures as William Blake, George Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, F. R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams'.<sup>12</sup>

All through these complications, however—and to me they are among the qualities that makes Robin's writings particularly rich—one has to admit that he continuously preserved his considerable talent for original, sympathetic analysis, for close observation and not least for those most beautifully articulated judgments of the value of individual works.

Nevertheless, the aforesaid grand statements or syntheses is to a certain extent part of both the thesis and the book genre. And in this respect I guess I failed a bit. That together with a certain provocative quality which was visible here and there, I have to confess, meant that my attempt to use Robin as a 'wedge I could use to break open the crust of prejudice and philistinism and hopefully smooth the path for others' finally did not generate very much at all. 'Onwards with the task of defending our national heritage culture', my colleagues appeared to confidently say as my thesis was filed the day after I performed my compulsory public defense.

Therefore, what I ended up with was a number of more 'mid-level' ideas and conclusions that together formed a history of ideas of sorts. I guess these conclusions were in a sense acceptable, perhaps even good and clever on occasion. All the same, that grand synthesis eluded me. Ever since an elaborate summation on the precise character of what Robin Wood had done—expressed in a number of elegant phrasings—has been something I have felt an inclination to produce. That said, I am still not sure I would be able to do it.

### Finale: The New Generation

In 2004 my wife and I spent the summer in Ithaca, upstate New York. One weekend in July we drove up to Toronto to see Robin and Richard. They took good care of us, cooked dinners, recommended DVD shops and even arranged an informal party with some of their friends.

While there, I vividly remember how Robin generously attempted to entertain the two kids present, his grandchild Nicholas as well as my own young son. Being short on the usual Disney fare, but still quite insistent on checking his considerable film library for suitable entertainment, he finally put on one of the few animated works he seemed to be in possession of. Characteristically, it turned out to be a BBC adaption of Leos Janacek's 1924 opera *The Cunning Little Vixen* (2003).

I do not know to what degree the two boys—both around three at the time—enjoyed what they saw and heard. What I remember though is the idealism, the infectious endeavor, the missionary zeal and the supreme belief in the arts with which Robin swiftly warmed to this slight task. Here was a new generation to be entertained, cultured and somehow become well-versed in the traditions of music and movies. Why not put them on the right path immediately and begin with a little Janacek, he seemed to say. If perhaps a little confounded by the somewhat unconventional experience at the start, the two small boys stayed for quite a while in front of the TV set, looking not

altogether unhappy as Robin dropped in every once in a while to explain a bit and urge them on.

While this took place, the experiences I had had a couple of years earlier with the works, career and considerable achievements of this inspiring if sometimes also difficult man was somehow brought to mind. And once again, despite the aforementioned obstacles, I thought it had been quite worthwhile. To end on a quote from one of the more moving obituaries published on the occasion of Robin's death, that particular moment, at least as far as I can recall, was typical of 'his insistently personal style, and of the intensity with which he lived movies, as he did so much else!'<sup>13</sup>

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### Notes

- 1 Olof Hedling "'Stop Whining and Get on with the Basic Business of Being British': Notes on Robin Wood, Canada and the Concept of National Film Culture" *Canadian Journal of Film Studies / Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 14, 2 (2005), 84-93.
- 2 David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, Mass et al.: Harvard UP, 2000), 1-17.
- 3 Göran Persson, "Persona Psychoanalyzed: Bergman's *Persona*: Rites of Spring as Chamber Play", *CineAction* no. 40, May 1996.
- 4 Bo Torp Pedersen, "Engelsk nykritik: Robin Wood og Victor F. Perkins" [British New Criticism: Robin Wood and Victor F. Perkins] (København, særnummer af filmtidsskriftet Spotlight, 1977) and Anders Troelsen, *Billedmedier og indholdsanalyse* [Visual Media and Content Analysis] (København: C-A Reitzels Boghandel A/S, 1979)
- 5 Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond* (1986) (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 295-308.
- 6 In fact, these 'scraps' was very much standard practice for Robin as I, for one, could have attested. In fact, and according to Richard Lippe, Robin wrote his lecture notes on a particular form of notepad for many years.
- 7 Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969) (London: BFI, 1998), 156. Robin and Peter Wollen had, of course, debated the merits of Godard in the British journal *New Left Review* already in 1966. At around the same time, Wollen, who worked at the British Film Institute at the time, commissioned the *Howard Hawks* book from Robin. He also acted as Robin's editor during the book's completion.
- 8 Robin Wood, "Godard & Weekend" *Movie* 16 (Winter 1968-69), 29.
- 9 It has to be mentioned that, as I finally received funding for my project, another PhD thesis on Robin's work was finished. This work, by Australian religious scholar Kenneth Oldmeadow is called "Robin Wood on Film: A Critical Trajectory, 1960-1995" was filed at La Trobe University, Melbourne in 1995. As far as I know, it has remained unpublished. Oldmeadow's thesis provided me with an extensive bibliography of Robin's work. As I kindly received this work from its author, in 1996, I initially felt disheartened as I thought I now had to scrap my own project. Eventually, however, I settled to work. As I, somewhat later, heard that someone had described my situation to American film scholar Janet Staiger and that she had reacted by casually remarking that Robin was worth ten PhDs it all felt rather good once again.
- 10 Robin Wood, "Return of the Repressed" *The Times Educational Supplement* 31.12.1976.
- 11 Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 40.
- 12 Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 7.
- 13 Charles Barr, "Robin Wood Obituary: Influential teacher, critic and pioneer in the field of film studies", *The Guardian* (London, UK) 4.01. 2010.



# Beyond the Male Gaze

DEPARTURES FROM SCOTTIE'S POINT OF VIEW IN *VERTIGO*



**Alfred Hitchcock told François Truffaut that 'the purest expression of a cinematic idea' was to cut between 'an immobilised man looking out', 'what he sees' and 'how he acts'**

(Truffaut, 1985: 214).

by JAMES ZBOROWSKI

*Vertigo* (1958) does not share with *Rear Window* (1954) (the film that Hitchcock and Truffaut were discussing) the ingredient of an immobilised man, but it does include extended passages of alternation between shots of the protagonist looking and shots from his optical point of view. The sequences near the beginning of the movie where Scottie (James Stewart) trails Madeleine (Kim Novak) around San Francisco, at the request of his old college acquaintance Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), Madeleine's husband, exhibit this mode of organisation most strongly. We mainly spend them alone with Scottie, following Madeleine from a distance, and they are central to the establishment of the close relationship we continue to share with Scottie for much of the rest of the film.

It is commonplace to assert that *Vertigo* is built around Scottie's perspective. There is important truth to this statement even in relation to scenes which do not approximate Hitchcock's definition of pure cinema as closely as the 'trailing' scenes, and which instead show Scottie interacting with



another character or characters at close range. Throughout, it remains unusual for us to be shown i) a shot from another character's optical point of view, ii) a reaction shot of another character which includes as part of its meaning the fact that Scottie has not noticed that reaction, or iii) scenes that begin or end not with Scottie but with another character. The scarcity of such moments makes them significant when they occur.

Robin Wood, returning in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* to *Vertigo*—the only film to have a chapter devoted to it in both the new section of that book, written from a changed ideological perspective, and the earlier portion, originally published as *Hitchcock's Films*, testament to the centrality of *Vertigo* to Hitchcock's work and Wood's understanding of it<sup>1</sup>—asserts that, prior to the revelation two-thirds of the way through of the solution to the film's mystery, we depart from Scottie's perspective only during 'three brief moments involving Midge, which hint at the possibility of critical distance but are not strong enough to offset the dominant identification pattern' (2002: 386).

Moments where *Vertigo's* visual flow ceases to be built around Scottie and what he sees and understands always involve one or more of the movie's principal female characters, and it is around those characters we will organise our account. 'Where are you now?' is one of Scottie's insistent questions of Madeleine, but it is one that might well be asked of him by his female companions on numerous occasions. We and the camera repeatedly share with the female characters private moments which Scottie fails to see, either due to physical absence or obliviousness. These private moments simultaneously exceed *Vertigo's* predominant, masculine perspective, and are an important part of the complex view of that perspective which the film articulates.

## Midge

Midge is the first of *Vertigo's* female characters to be introduced, in the movie's second scene, which takes place in her apartment. In his original account of the film, Wood offers Midge's 'cluttered studio-cum-living room' where 'Miro's on the wall are juxtaposed indiscriminately with fashion designs' as part of the film's complex and economical assessment of her:

**Midge is practical, realistic, emancipated, eminently sane, positive and healthy in her outlook: but from the outset the inadequacies revealed later are hinted at. A trained artist, she devotes her energies to sketching the advertisements for brassieres.<sup>2</sup> [...] Entirely devoid of mystery or reserve, [...] she reduces everything to the same matter-of-fact level. Yet one senses already a discrepancy between what she is and what she might be. (2002: 111)**

In his later chapter, Wood emphasises the film's emphatic separation of Scottie and Midge for much of the scene, 'each [character's] space defined by the framing and by its own significant object (the model brassiere, Scottie's cane) prominent throughout each series' (ibid: 381).

### MOMENT ONE: Midge's three reaction shots

The separation which Wood highlights becomes most pro-

nounced in three reaction shots of Midge early in the scene, which show us her private reactions to Scottie's words. The first of these shots follows Scottie's reaction to Midge's suggestion that, after his sudden retirement from the police force following an accident, it might do him good to 'go away for a while': 'Don't be so motherly', he tells her. By this point, he has wandered to the opposite corner of the living area. The camera, however, has moved closer to Midge (who remains seated at her drawing desk). When we return to her after the line 'Don't be so motherly', the wider earlier framing has been replaced by a medium close-up. From this position, her initial reaction to Scottie's comment is rendered as the tiniest of gestures. Our three-quarters profile view of her combined with the position of her spectacles means that we only have a very limited view of her eyes. It is because we see Midge's *eyelashes* move that we know she has looked up from her work! This is accompanied by an ever so slight frowning of her brow. Midge has been stung by Scottie's comment. She turns to look at him, which also means that she turns towards the camera, and her wounded expression becomes more visible—to us. The shot lasts less than two seconds. The scale of Midge's reaction is such that we understand it to be private, even before we cut back to Scottie and see that he was not, in any case, looking in Midge's direction.

This shot is similar in effect to a pair of close-ups of Midge which shortly follow, described by Wood as shots 'used to comment on Scottie, to call him into question' (ibid). Scottie has enquired after Midge's love life, asking her 'Aren't you ever going to get married?' 'You know there's only one man in the world for me Johnny-O' is Midge's reply, offered levelly, without self-pity or expectation (and without her ceasing her sketching). We cut to Scottie, now leaning back on the couch, smiling. 'You mean me,' he says, not really asking. But then he adds 'We were engaged once though weren't we?' As he completes the question, we cut to the first of the pair of close-up reaction shots of Midge.

The camera is now even closer to Midge than in the earlier private reaction shot, but this spatial proximity is again accompanied by a distance, achieved and asserted this time not only by the barrier of the spectacles, which again mask Midge's eyes, but also by the shot's framing of Midge from above, which prevents its closeness from constituting a declaration of intimacy (and also further insists upon the differentiation of our view at this moment from Scottie's). When Midge looks up at Scottie for a brief moment, her right eye is visible over the top of her spectacles. But she looks down again, and her eyes are again hidden from our sight, before she answers his question through a forced smile: 'Three whole weeks'. The impression given, when we view Midge from this angle, goes beyond her not looking at Scottie: she appears to be hiding herself.

We return to Scottie. 'Good old college days', he muses—'evoking a time, an "elsewhere", of youthful activity, spontaneity and libido' (Barr, 2002: 38), waving away something we can see Midge still carries with her. And although Scottie will then gesture towards Midge with his cane and point out 'You were the one that called off the engagement, remember?', we have reached a point where no utterance is being offered with the expectation that it will lead to anything. This is why Scottie's next words, which on paper might look like an



invitation, confirm the stalemate. 'I'm still available,' he declares abstractedly, almost to himself, looking downwards, 'Available Ferguson.' As we hear the first half of this declaration, we see Midge, in the second of her close-ups, once more look over her spectacles at Scottie for a moment, glancing at him through a frown, before she averts her gaze again and returns to a furrowed forward stare.

**MOMENT TWO: outside Scottie's apartment**

We are almost fifty minutes further into the movie. It is night time, and Madeleine is stealing away from Scottie's apartment. We have cut to the exterior, without Scottie, to see Madeleine getting into her car. A reverse shot shows us another car pulling up across the road. A cut-in reveals that the driver is Midge. We cut back to our view of the apartment, which now constitutes Midge's optical point of view. This is the first of five shots which alternate between Midge looking and what she sees.

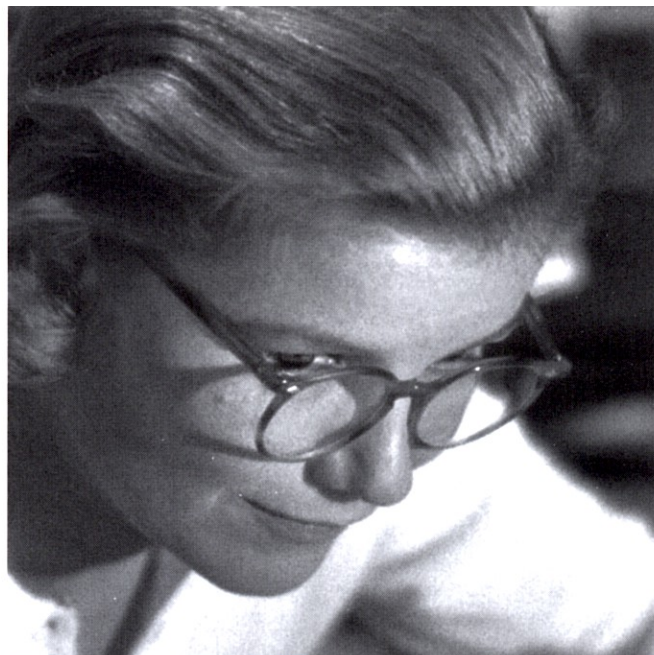
The second of Midge's three reaction shots is the key one, and is held the longest. After her initial dismay, she falteringly forces out a pursed-lipped smile. I take it that she seeks to maintain composure by conjuring an audience for herself, to whom she must offer a public face. 'Well now Johnny-O,' she says softly, 'Was it a ghost? Was it fun?' She manages to inject a tone of triumph at first, casting herself in the role of one who has caught Scottie out and is calling him to account, but this fades, along with her smile, and gives way to the plaintive inflection of her second question. Scottie comes to his door, looking for Madeleine; Midge turns, and drives, away.

**MOMENT THREE: the portrait of Midge**

Another fifteen minutes later (and again, immediately after an emotionally charged scene between Scottie and Madeleine), we arrive at Midge's apartment a few moments before Scottie, to find Midge giggling to herself, and adding a few finishing touches to her canvas (which is turned away from us). After Scottie's arrival, it is revealed that Midge has recreated the portrait of Carlotta (Madeleine's ancestor, whom she is obsessed with, and, the movie has hinted, perhaps possessed by), but has substituted her own face, spectacles and all, for Carlotta's.

After a shot which replicates the movement of Scottie's eyes up the portrait to reveal Midge's face, and a shot to show the tightening and twitching of Scottie's face in response to what he sees, there is a shot which frames the portrait at its right, and, at its left, Midge, seated in a similar posture, looking to Scottie, stricken. Remarkably, this is the closest the movie will come to a shot of Midge marked as being from Scottie's point of view, and its effect is in fact to underline Scottie's failure throughout the film to see Midge, and to see her as she would wish him to. He puts his hat back on and leaves.

We stay with Midge. She rises, and calls after him faintly, then grasps two fistfuls of hair and pulls them back. This time she does not attempt to maintain composure, but does exercise another brand of self-disciplining, and distances herself from the moment via a third person address. 'Oh Marjorie Wood you fool—IDIOT!' she self-admonishes, using the parental mode of full-naming. In a further act of violence directed against herself, she seizes a paintbrush and makes three brutal strokes on the canvas, the effects of which we are not shown, although we can see that they are applied in the region of the portrait's—that is,



Barbara Bel Geddes as Midge





Scottie saves Madeleine

Midge's—face. She hurls the brush against the window, and grabs her hair again, and spits 'Stupid!' with each tug, until we fade out. Twice, then, when Midge is alone, she strikes up an exchange with herself. We might say she is most truly alone at the moments at her drawing desk while Scottie sits on the other side of the room.

#### MOMENT FOUR:

##### **'I don't think Mozart's going to help at all'**

Scottie's failure to see Midge approaches the literal when she visits him in the sanatorium (a further fifteen minutes through the movie), following Madeleine's apparent suicide and Scottie's breakdown. As Barr (2002: 63) notes, Scottie's 'visual sense [...] has atrophied' since the departure of Madeleine, and this process reaches its culmination here. A melancholic, near-catatonic Scottie manages to offer Midge what might be hints of rueful smiles, but nothing more. At one point in the scene we get a pair of shots which are from Scottie's position, but not his point of view. Midge, addressing Scottie, looks downwards and directly into the lens (the framing repeating Scottie's suggestion in the earlier scene that Midge is being 'motherly'). The answering shot reveals a high angle view of Scottie static in his seat, not turning to meet Midge's gaze.

Midge kisses Scottie goodbye. The camera follows her as she goes to speak to the doctor. She supplements for him the story that has now become a case history, and delivers her verdict on the institution's 'musical therapy'. We then watch as she slowly walks down the corridor, away from the camera, and, as it will turn out, out of the movie (thirty minutes before its end).

#### **Madeleine**

The occasions where we find ourselves alone with Midge constitute exceptions to *Vertigo's* predominant pattern of alignment, but they do not disrupt the overall organisation of its point of view in the way that similar moments shared with Madeleine would.

Douglas Pye identifies *Vertigo* as an instance of what he terms suppressive narrative. As he points out, the film not only withholds information from us for a significant proportion of its running time; the story is presented to us in such a way that the withholding is itself withheld. This is achieved in part by 'a use of generic cues which have the effect of misleading the spectator' (1992: 100). We are not primed, as we often are in Hitchcock's stories of crime and detection, to be on the lookout for deception and dissimulation, because the film appears at first not to concern crime, but rather a woman who may be possessed by 'someone dead', and to belong, therefore, to a genre which accommodates the supernatural.

Our access to Madeleine is more restricted than our access to Midge, but that restriction does not feel artificial. Scottie is the protagonist. The story at first involves him following Madeleine from a distance, and Madeleine is presented, before we even see her, as a mysterious figure. These facts combine to make the camera's holding of her at a distance feel appropriate. Madeleine is 'presented as a dream', Wood argues,



and she becomes our dream as well as Scottie's. If her own movements, in their grace, their air of remoteness, are dream-like, the effect of dream is intensified by Hitchcock's use of the camera. Leisurely, steady-paced subjective tracking shots characterize the sequences in which Scottie follows Madeleine; we are placed behind the windscreen of his car in the driver's seat as he follows her around the streets of San Francisco, pursuing a dream through modern surface reality; we wander at his walking pace round the graveyard; we watch Madeleine continually through his eyes, her distance, her silence, his and our inability to understand her, help her, protect her, are all part of the fascination. (2002: 114).

Here is an example of the organic unity of *Vertigo* celebrated by Wood a few pages later (a unity, we might add, also exhibited by his remarkably precise, elegant and nuanced critical account): plot, viewpoint, and thematic development are inextricably interwoven.

Private reaction shots of Madeleine and shots from her optical point of view are, then, as we would expect, scarce. Wood counts three POV shots from Madeleine's perspective. The first is, as he acknowledges, 'ambiguous': 'the shot of the broken petals on the water just before [her] false attempted suicide, a shot enclosed within an elaborate structure of Scottie's point of view and equally readable as his empathic image of what Madeleine sees' (ibid: 386, original italics). The other two are 'shots of trees through the car windshield' as Scottie drives Madeleine to San Juan Batista. Barr (2002: 68) supplements this tally: 'At the end of the first long conversation in Scottie's apartment, we see through her eyes as Scottie goes out of the room to answer Elster's phone call. In the redwood forest, two shots seem to represent a shared POV, as she and Scottie look together at the cross-section of the tree'. The first of the two shots which Barr highlights is preceded by a shot in which Scottie leaves Madeleine alone in the frame, and the camera lingers for a moment on her gaze at Scottie. We can call this a private reaction shot, but Madeleine's expression and the shot's duration and framing do not constitute a 'backstage' moment: there is no hint that this woman is performing a role. Nor is this a reaction shot which comments on Scottie or permits interpretation of the thought and feeling of the person looking as those of Midge and Judy do.

## Judy

### The revelation sequence

The most sustained and consequential moment of departure from Scottie and his consciousness comes around twenty five minutes before the end of the movie. It changes completely our understanding of what we have seen so far, and provides us with a new perspective from which to view subsequent events. Scottie exits the hotel room of the woman he has just met, Judy Barton, with whom he has arranged a date that evening. The camera remains behind, and it is revealed that Judy does not merely resemble the woman whom Scottie was in love with and believes to be dead; she is that woman.

A montage first reprises shots from an earlier sequence.

Madeleine runs up the bell tower; Scottie pursues, trying to stop her, but his vertigo immobilises him. The montage culminates in new shots, which reveal new information. We see inside the belfry for the first time, and discover there Gavin Elster. When Madeleine reaches the top, Elster throws the body of the woman in his arms—identically dressed and similar in appearance to Madeleine—off the tower. So Judy was playing the role of Madeleine Elster to Scottie, with the intention that he would be a witness to this apparent suicide! The real Madeleine Elster, whom we glimpse here for the first and only time (and whom Scottie never sees), is one of Hitchcock's female characters who is murdered by her husband.

We return to Judy in her hotel room. Her first impulse is to abscond: she takes a suitcase and clothes from her wardrobe. But then she sits at her desk, and starts to write a letter to Scottie, the contents of which are rendered as a voiceover. What we should have deduced from what we have just seen is reiterated, and some other aspects of the movie's particularly complex interweaving of the factual and the fabricated, the feigned and the genuinely felt, are partly clarified. We learn that the story of Carlotta was 'part real, part invented', and that although Judy was playing a role when she told Scottie she loved him, the declaration itself was genuine, and she loves him still.

Murray Smith (1995: 155) suggests that in this sequence we are not only 'made party to the actions of Madeline [sic]/Judy outside of Scottie's presence', but that we are 'given access to Judy's thoughts (in the form of a visualized flashback with voiceover)'. Smith's assertion is not entirely incorrect, but it is imprecise.

The voiceover does not accompany the 'visualized flashback', as Smith's overcompressed description implies; it follows, separately. The flashback is therefore not an instance of a sequence of images motivated, even in part, by a character's verbal account. Furthermore, the flashback, until we reach the part that delivers the twist, comprises a truncated version of a sequence of images we have already seen, further lessening Judy's 'ownership' of them. Perhaps we ought to say that this sequence, rather than giving us access to Judy's thoughts—rendering the movement of her mind at this precise moment—gives us access to what she *knows*, via a series of images that are independent of her consciousness. The voiceover that follows is not simply a stream of consciousness: it is a verbal rendering of the letter to Scottie that Judy sits down and writes. The letter may arise from and express certain thoughts, but it is not itself a thought; it is an object in the world of the movie that results from an action (and is just as quickly destroyed by a further action, which signals Judy's intention not to run, but to 'stay and lie', and try to make Scottie love her).<sup>3</sup>

And yet. There is a further important feature of the revelation sequence that might lead us back towards Smith's implication that the movie projects Judy's consciousness. When Scottie closes the door of the hotel room, the camera tracks left, and arrives at a close-up of the back of Judy's head. She slowly turns, until she is facing the camera, then looks up and into the lens. The screen becomes tinted with red, and the urgency of Herrmann's score increases, before we dissolve to the flashback. The sequence ends with precise symmetry. We dissolve back to Judy's gaze. The red hue fades. Judy closes her eyes for a moment, then looks down and turns away.



Judy's act of turning, looking, and then turning away again only makes sense if she is turning to look at something; the motions and their timing are otherwise completely unmotivated. Why does she need to turn in order to see?<sup>4</sup> The fact that it is a turning towards the camera, and the audience, gives this scene of revelation the feeling also of confession.<sup>5</sup> Such an impression is underlined by the letter to Scottie which shortly follows—although we might wish to add that another pertinent fact about the staging of this sequence is that Judy's turn towards the camera is also a turn away from where Scottie stood just before he left. She has shown one identity to him; she then turns to reveal another side.

It is a rich and enigmatic moment. We might compare Judy's turning to face an audience with Midge's words in the car to the absent Scottie; we can contrast Midge's privacy at her drawing desk, her frustration of the camera's insistent gaze, with Judy's turning to face the camera. (We might also compare Judy's letter to Midge's painting, both attempts to 'say' something to Scottie, part of both messages being 'I am not Madeleine, but acknowledge me, and love me'.)

The revelation sequence recasts our understanding of what we have already seen—including, as Barr (2002: 68) notes, the handful of point of view shots from Madeleine's perspective, which occur 'at a series of climactic moments in the process of her exploitation by Elster' and 'acquire extra poignancy in retrospect, as glimpses of a subjective experience that we recognise as being as complex and emotional as Scottie's.'

The next eight scenes (around eight minutes of screen time) show Judy and Scottie together around San Francisco. In those scenes, her perspective is as prominent as his: we spend a lot of time registering her private reactions, and watching her regard Scottie, whose attention is often elsewhere.

### 1. Ernie's

This scene comprises seven shots. 1. The camera (in a movement which retraces part of that which first revealed Madeleine in this same place, but not that shot's wonder) slowly pans across the dining area, revealing first Judy, then Scottie. They sit at opposite ends of the table and of the frame, silently and unsmilingly eating, separated by the tableware and a large candle which stands at their eye level. 2. Scottie, alone in the frame, looks up, and something catches his eye. 3. Judy is framed on the right, in the foreground. In the background of the left of the frame, we see a woman in a grey suit with platinum blonde hair (that is, a woman who replicates Madeleine's appearance) approaching. Judy looks up, and the movement of her fork ceases abruptly as she regards Scottie. 4. Scottie averts his eyes and slowly bows his head. This is the last time he will appear onscreen in the scene. 5. Judy turns, just in time to see the woman (whose resemblance to Madeleine is lessened now that she is closer) pass by the table. Judy's eyes follow the woman. 6. The woman is seated at an adjacent table in this shot from Judy's point of view. 7. Judy, now in medium close-up, turns first to gaze at Scottie (we do not see him, but can tell he is not looking at her, as he hasn't for the whole scene). But she cannot address the situation she finds herself in: Scottie has admitted that she reminds him of another woman, but nothing that Scottie has told her would explain her knowledge of the woman's clothes or hair. She returns her gaze to its direction at

the start of the scene: downwards, towards her meal.

### 2. Hotel Empire

Scottie and Judy return to her hotel. Inside, he asks to see her again—tomorrow. 'Why? Because I remind you of her?' Judy asks. The answer is provided by the shot from Scottie's point of view that follows. Judy is framed in one of Madeleine's signature orientations towards the camera: in profile (Harvey, 2001: 33). Her head is silhouetted against the green of the neon sign outside the window; Judy's differences in appearance from Madeleine are minimised. The camera underlines the moment and expresses Scottie's, its and our fascination by moving towards her, as the strings on Herrmann's soundtrack swell. But again, we are invited a few shots later to distinguish our viewpoint from Scottie's, and to share Judy's. Scottie remains where he is, but we view Judy close-up and almost straight-on. The side of her face that Scottie can see remains in shadow, but we see the other side too, lit in green. The camera lingers on her as she contemplates the situation she is in, before nervously deciding to accede to Scottie's insistent requests. As soon as she does so, Scottie leaves without a further word. We are left for a moment with her, framed in long shot, alone by the window.

### 3. Walking by the lake

This short sequence of four shots includes one from Judy's POV which, as Wood (2002: 387) suggests, 'excludes Scottie, and comments on him'. That shot shows a young couple on the grass: she is lying on her back; he leans in and kisses her. We cut back to Judy and Scottie. She is still looking towards the couple; he is looking in the opposite direction. This contrasting of the two couples resonates in the short, single shot scene that follows.

### 4. Ballroom dancing

Scottie and Judy dance amongst other couples in a 'sedate and middle-aged' (Barr, 2002: 70) setting. Scottie, still unsmiling and rigid, looks dead ahead. We can see some of the other couples communicating with glances and comments, but, as at Ernie's, as by the lake, Scottie and Judy do not exchange a word, and he appears intent on avoiding meeting her gaze or even looking at her. At first, Judy's face is obscured as she nestles in Scottie's chest, but as the couple turn, and Judy repositions her head, we see her steal a nervous glance at him.

### 5. Buying a flower

In the central shot of this short scene, Judy provides the focus. She occupies the centre of the frame, and while Scottie (who, having ignored her expression of preference, has picked out the flower that *he* likes) turns away from the camera to pin the flower to her, her face remains visible. We again see her nervous, darting glances. 'It's beautiful,' she tells Scottie, holding, for a moment, a gaze into his face; offering him, in the same gesture, her countenance, trying to make this a moment of romance. But Scottie is on a mission. 'There we are. Now, we'll get this, and then we'll buy you those clothes.'

### 6. Ransohoff's

At first during this sequence, as outfits are modelled to the seated pair, we see Judy trying to fulfil the role of the grateful recipient, registering pleasure at the garments offered, but also



gauging Scottie's reaction, and trying to adjust hers accordingly. Once again, Scottie is oblivious. He rejects everything shown, and tries to explain to the store assistant what he wants. The camera creates another private moment for (and with) Judy. As the assistant in the background of the frame comments 'The gentleman seems to know what he wants', we see the realisation dawn for Judy that Scottie is looking for the exact suit that Madeleine wore. She gives a veiled glance offscreen, in Scottie's direction, but she cannot reveal what she knows. When the assistant helpfully states 'Oh I think I know the suit you mean, we had it some time ago' a moment later though, Judy takes her chance. 'You're looking for the suit that she wore, for me', she challenges Scottie.

## 7. Shoes

Judy resists Scottie's designs, but ultimately capitulates, as demonstrated by the one shot scene of shoe-buying that follows. She glares at Scottie as he informs the salesman of the decisions he has reached, but remains silent, and compliant.

## 8. Scottie's apartment

Resistance followed by capitulation is reprised in the next scene. Judy tells Scottie she wants to go away. He tells her it is not simply her resemblance to Madeleine that makes him want to be with her. But then his gaze falls on her hair. Judy agrees to change its colour: 'If I let you change me, will that do it? If I do what you tell me, will you love me?'

Scottie also pursues his quest to recreate the past more subtly at two moments in this scene. As we rejoin the couple, Scottie is pouring a drink. He takes it to Judy, and tells her to 'drink this straight down, just like medicine', almost exactly the same turn of phrase he used with Madeleine in a previous scene in his apartment. Judy does not register this repetition, but she does register the second one. After she has agreed to let Scottie change her, he leads her to the fireside, dropping a cushion onto the carpet for her. When Madeleine is in Scottie's apartment for the first time he drops a pair of cushions by the fire for her—a moment rendered in a close-up (which approximates Madeleine's point of view).

In the scene with Judy, the close-up is not reprised. Instead, we remain in a spacious two shot which allows us to feel the pathos of the situation, and witness the reactions of both characters. Judy is in front of Scottie, so he cannot see her face, which means she can permit herself a pause and a glance which acknowledge the repetition. Scottie's expression is pained and haunted; his arms are slightly raised—frozen while he waits to see whether his Madeleine mannequin will travel along the track he has laid out for her.

Judy recognises the annihilation of her own subjectivity as the price of being with Scottie, and she is willing to pay it. 'I don't care about me anymore', she tells him. It is appropriate then, that after this scene, as Barr (2002: 72) notes, 'the focus shifts back decisively to Scottie.' Wood similarly observes that 'as Scottie reconstructs Judy as Madeleine' (2002: 387)—that is, as he regains and reasserts his power, and Judy abdicates hers—his point of view comes to dominate once again.

In the scene which follows the one in Scottie's apartment, we join him as he confirms his instructions to the beautician regarding the appearance of Judy, who is offscreen. After a



Scottie after Madeleine's death





Scottie ignores Judy





Judy, again as Madelaine, thinks she has Scottie's love



short montage of Judy's makeover—which continues the effacement of her subjectivity, and (ominously and eloquently) could almost represent the preparation of a corpse for a funeral—we join Scottie at Judy's hotel room as he waits for Madeleine to return. There follow some of the most important and affecting shots of the film from Scottie's perspective: first, the series of four from his optical point of view in which we first see Judy's finalised transformation into Madeleine, and the shot which follows, where the camera circles the couple and renders Scottie's hallucinatory transportation to the livery stable at the San Juan Batista.

In the postcoital scene that follows, Scottie, seeing Carlotta's necklace, deduces what has already been revealed to us. He does not, however, reveal this to Judy. Our alignment with Scottie in terms of knowledge is reinstated, even if, by this point, his actions mean that we cannot regain our previous closeness to him. From this point until the end of the movie, moments which depart from Scottie to show Judy's point of view or private reactions become rare once again. The only such moments come as Scottie drives with Judy back to the San Juan Batista, to revisit the past. The previous pair of point of view shots through the windscreen are reprised—along with Judy/Madeleine's pensive reactions. This repetition, Barr argues, conveys Judy's 'sense of being trapped in the compulsive replaying of a male-driven scenario' (2002: 73). A third point of view shot is added. Judy, as she did on the previous journey, turns to look at Scottie. This time, though, we do not cut to a frontal framing of Scottie, which shows him turning to return Madeleine's look, and smiling; we cut to a shot that frames him as Judy sees him: Madeleine-like, in profile, not acknowledging or returning the gaze. For once, he is a mystery to her.<sup>6</sup> Judy, like Midge, often finds herself alone in Scottie's company.

After the revelation sequence, there is not the same reason that existed before not to show us Judy outside of Scottie's presence, and yet this does not occur (with the technical exception of the beautician scene). But then, Judy's decision to 'stay and lie' marks the beginning of the end of everything in her life apart from Scottie. The friends or colleagues whom we see Judy with when Scottie first spots her on the street quickly evaporate, never to be seen again. After their first night together, Scottie persuades her not to go back to her job. She at first agrees just to make some excuse the following day, but we can assume that she never returns. *Vertigo's* outcome is a product of Judy's character as well as Scottie's.

## Conclusion

**I find I have emphasized silence, isolation in fantasy, the mysteries of human motion and separateness: such are the conditions of existence that film, in its magical reproduction of the world, tries and tries not to transgress. (Cavell, 1979: 147)**

One way of describing Scottie's initial quest would be to state that he follows Madeleine to find out what she does when she is alone. As film viewers, we can go one better than Scottie: we can watch what a character does when they are alone, from close-up. Two better, perhaps: the camera can not only move in close to a character who is alone; it can create a private

moment, make them appear alone, even when they are in a room with another person.

Even if Scottie is, on the second fateful drive to San Juan Batista, momentarily a mystery to Judy, Rothman's assertion (1988: 158) that '[w]e read Scottie [...] like an open book' captures an important dimension of the movie. Our sustained act of looking *with* Scottie means that we may also, in part, look through him (at least, until we are detached from him after Madeleine's apparent plunge, and by all that follows). Scottie becomes a vehicle for and an expression of our fascination with another's condition of being alone, rather than its subject. It is this that makes him our viewing surrogate.

We believe, during our first viewing of *Vertigo*, that we are, with Scottie, watching Madeleine, and that she believes herself to be alone. Like the best movie stars, under the best direction, Madeleine appears, 'naturally', spontaneously, to comport herself elegantly and eloquently. Judy/Madeleine repeatedly 'exhibit[s] herself, with apparently innocent seductiveness, in [...] especially blatant and radiant poses' (Barr, 2002: 44). Even if we and Scottie later learn that we have been misled, we, the viewers, should not feel as empty-handed after this revelation as Scottie. We *do* share private moments with *Vertigo's* female characters, both when they are alone, and when, in Scottie's presence, they lack his acknowledgment, or exceed his comprehension. Midge is usually described, and correctly so, as a foil to the mystery represented by Madeleine. The account offered above of the private moments we share with Midge is intended to qualify that view without seeking to reject it, and to articulate further the great sympathy that Wood recognises the film as extending to Midge.

Scottie falls in love with a woman who is alone and beyond reach; this is a fundamental part of his and our fascination with her. His drive to possess and control her entails the destruction of what draws him to her in the first place. Like one of his nearest cinematic relatives, Jeff in *Rear Window*, Scottie is reluctant to relinquish the habit of viewing from a distance to instead embrace something he can touch.

*Vertigo's* intense self-reflexivity has been extensively addressed, and what sometimes emerges from such accounts is the film's resistance to the reductive theories of film applied to it. As Tania Modleski (2005: 13) incisively observes, Laura Mulvey's infamous 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' 'uses Hitchcock films as the main evidence in her case against Hollywood cinema', but 'actually ends up claiming that *Vertigo* is critical of the kinds of visual pleasure typically offered by mainstream cinema'.

The second subtitle of the introduction to Mulvey's essay is 'Destruction of Pleasure as a Radical Weapon' (1975: 7), a statement of intent which points towards broader features of the intellectual moment in which it was produced. Wood critically addresses and distances himself from this position in his captivating 1988 introduction to *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, a beautiful, extended account which outlines his new ideological position, but also reaffirms his commitment to human individuality and creativity.

We might see a parallel between the destruction of pleasure aimed for by that moment of film theory, and that experienced by Scottie when Judy shows him Carlotta's necklace. 'But what does he know' after he has seen the necklace? Rothman (1988:





#### Scottie's apartment

164) asks pointedly, this critic's exceptional alertness to Hitchcock's challenges to what we think we know being especially pertinent at this moment. Scottie thinks he now knows that Madeleine did not write, she was written. He did not, as he previously believed, behold and engage with something precious, personal and mysterious, the emanation of an individual; he was merely the passive victim of a signifying system.

Perhaps *Vertigo*, as well as offering a compelling and painful dramatisation of the violence enacted in an attempt to hold onto regressive fantasies of masculine dominance and romantic love, carries a warning about another kind of violence; that enacted as a consequence of the closing off, the failure to see, that accompanies putative knowledge held and wielded too rigidly, which transforms the world into a prison for those who live in it.

'We are all constructed by our culture, yet each of us is unique' (Wood, 2002: 20). *Vertigo* exceeds the role that film theory casts it in, and Judy exceeds the role that Elster casts her in, and falls in love. This is a fact that Wood's first account of the film brings out particularly well (ibid: 121-3), and it is one of the key things that the film, in those moments where it exceeds 'the male gaze', wants to show us. Judy is not *just* written, passive; her actions are not *merely* empty signifiers. To wish for Scottie to recognise this is to ask a lot of him, given his relationship to events. However, we can observe that his failure to do so constitutes a central entry in his fatal catalogue of failures to see.

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#### Notes

- 1 In the 2002 edition of *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, Wood adds a final chapter on another film discussed in *Hitchcock's Films: 'You Freud, Me Hitchcock: Marnie Revisited'*.
- 2 We are shown Midge's sketch early in the scene, in a shot which can certainly be read as being from her point of view. This shot, however, does not have the same charge as later fleeting POV shots from the perspectives of Madeleine and Judy.
- 3 In a recent account of this sequence, William Rothman asserts that towards the end of the passage of voiceover, Judy 'has stopped writing; what began as a letter to Scottie has become an interior monologue' (2010: 171). However, the film does not allow us to be sure of this. Towards the end, the camera frames Judy from the shoulders up, looking down towards her desk. Only after her voiceover ends (with her challenge to herself 'I don't know whether I have the nerve to try') does she look up from the page. (We may note the use of the convention whereby characters are able to write as quickly as they speak, and we may squint to try to see if what is written on the page Judy holds up matches the words we have heard, but these are other matters.)
- 4 We might note that the scene has already made use of the mirror on Judy's wall, and another way of dramatising reflection available to Hitchcock but not chosen would have been to have Judy turn to face herself.
- 5 Marian Keane (1986: 237), in her account of this moment, sees it less as a demonstration of the camera's ability to define or to know Judy's thoughts, and more as a declaration of Judy's 'awareness of the camera's presence; her look acknowledges Hitchcock and us'.
- 6 'Using such a profile shot to signify withdrawal or withholding is [a] Hitchcockian signature', William Rothman (1988: 165) asserts. It may also be of interest to note that this profile POV shot of Scottie is the only close-up POV of him in the entire film.



# Normality is Threatened by the **Monster**

ROBIN WOOD, ROMERO AND ZOMBIES

by LUCY FIFE DONALDSON

The democratic scope of Robin Wood's film criticism is something to be celebrated in itself; that his interests were always varied and wide ranging is the key strength of his writing. Who, but Robin Wood, would have seen *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) as American family comedies? His critical career started with a call for taking Hitchcock seriously, and it is this quality, of taking movies seriously (cutting across apparent binaries of 'art' and 'exploitation'), that I admire the most, not least when it comes to horror. My tribute to Robin Wood will focus on his influence on horror criticism, and more specifically, on his appraisal of George A. Romero as 'a great and audacious filmmaker' through detailed consideration of his zombie movies.<sup>1</sup>

Robin Wood's approach to horror is characteristic of his criticism more generally, in its capacity to directly address and unravel concerns central to the experience of film. In an attempt to echo his characteristically straightforward manner I will start with a list of the key elements of his extraordinary influence on horror criticism.

**1. 'Normality is threatened by the monster'.<sup>2</sup>** Wood's basic formula for all horror films presents a paradigm which cuts directly to the key dynamics of the genre, despite its many forms across the varied eras of American filmmaking. His forthright statement crucially understands horror's close relationship to other genres—as indicated by his suggestion of the substitution of 'monster' for Indians/aliens etc—yet doesn't undermine its complexity.

**2. 'Return of the repressed'.** Consistent with his earlier observation that genres represent 'different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions', Wood's argument that horror dramatises the process of repression and its rupture in ideological terms, is a seminal argument which has since dominated the general landscape of horror writing.<sup>3</sup> Building on the normality/monster paradigm, Wood situates the potential radicalism or conservatism of horror as stemming from this central concept, depending on how the ensuing tensions are dealt with; whether the monster is defeated or 'normality' is not re-established, ambiguity allowed to remain a problem:

**One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses: its re-emergence dramatized, as**

**in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the 'happy ending' (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression.<sup>4</sup>**

**3. Ambivalence.** From these thematic and ideological bases Wood connected address and response by drawing attention to the ambivalence encouraged by horror. Most strikingly, for Wood this is expressed by a sympathetic monster (he suggested that few are totally unsympathetic) and its destruction of 'normality': 'Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfilment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and to which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere'.<sup>5</sup> Wood's perception that the monster has its source in the very systems of normal society is a conceptually brilliant and highly persuasive hypothesis, the importance of which cannot be underestimated.

**4. Horror's importance to American Cinema.** In coherence with his observation that '[o]ne of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre has been the tendency to treat the genres as discrete', through Wood's analyses horror is treated seriously, as one of the central genres of American cinema.<sup>6</sup> This quality of Wood's writing is also consistent with his enthusiasm for films of all kinds; his writing on horror must be seen as part of his commitment to a range of areas which converge in illuminating ways. While the ascendancy of the horror film in the 1970s lends itself to his understanding of 'the horror film as an important phenomenon within our culture, since the genre, and particularly its finest specimens offer [...] the material for a radical and diagnostic reading of the culture itself', Wood's criteria for conservatism/radicalism remains a revealing basis for considerations of modern horror.<sup>7</sup> In the background of these core threads, is the importance of film's form in shaping viewer's experience—for example, the power of Hitchcock's mise-en-scène to make us *feel* attitudes to characters and situations—to Wood's writing on film. His desire and ability to capture the attitude of a film, or genre in this case, to the viewer and convey the relationship between the two runs underpins his criticism.

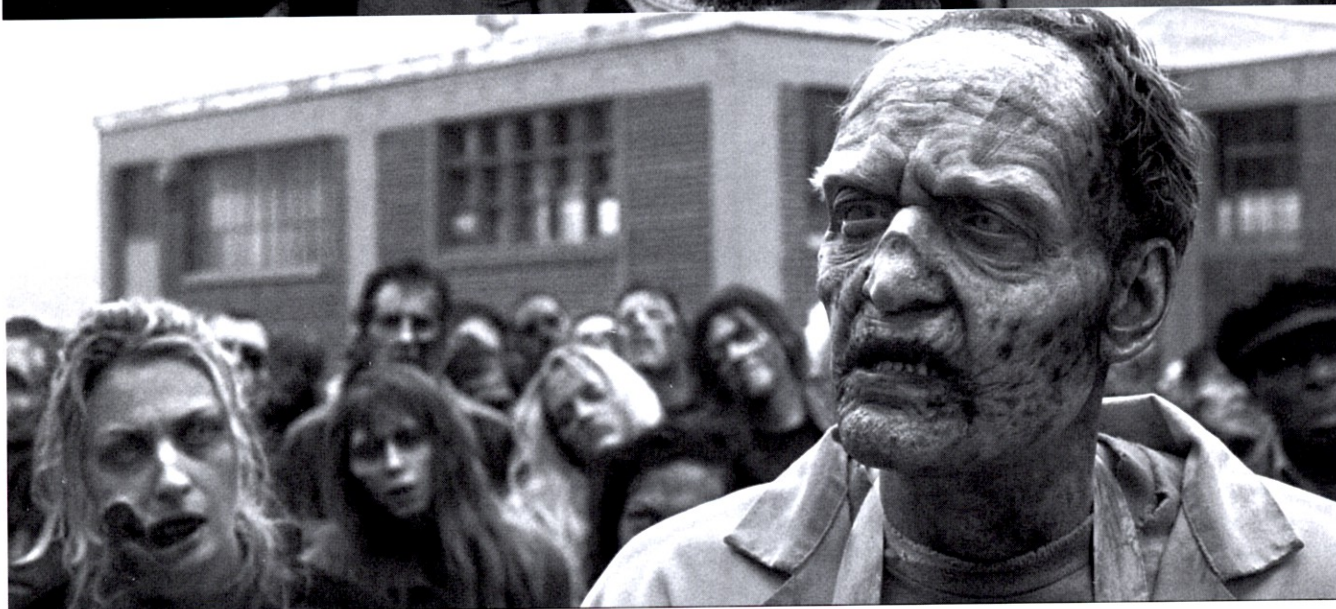
One monster that directly responds to horror's potential ambivalence is the zombie, or, more specifically, George A. Romero's re-articulation of the zombie from voodoo slave to flesh-eating undead American, as depicted in *Night of the Living*





*Diary of the Dead* (2007)





*Land of the Dead* (2005)

*Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). As such, it is no surprise that, for Wood, 'Romero's work represents the most progressive potentialities of the horror film, the possibility of breaking the impasse of the monster/normality relationship developed out of Gothic tradition'.<sup>8</sup> The manner of Romero's reconstruction of the undead plays with their various physical possibilities: alive but dead; animated but unconscious; collective yet individual; ungainly yet deadly; oppressive yet simultaneously oppressed. Indeed, the tensions Romero imbues in their representation underline a doubling centred on the apparent opposition, and eventual paralleling, of the living and the undead. From the first time a zombie is seen and initially mistaken for a living person, to the later presentation of them in large groups, where each zombie is different and carries the indicators of its former life (specifically through details of costume), the commonality across their various incarnations is that they remain materially close to that of the living. The decision to make them look like people, not otherworldly monsters, means the zombies maintain a strong connection to their living counterparts, and it is this ordinariness that Romero's films are particularly keen to preserve. As Steven Shaviri suggests, while the first three films are 'violently apocalyptic; at the

same time they remain disconcertingly close to the habitual surfaces and mundane realities of everyday life'.<sup>9</sup> Romero's zombies are the ultimate *internal* threat, and one which raises more ideological and material tensions than it could ever resolve. They threaten normality as defined in the films: the unity of the family; heterosexual norms, including the social norms of masculinity and femininity, as male and female zombies are equally monstrous, living women become active agents in destruction of the undead and couples are driven apart by the crisis; the importance of capitalism, as money and systems of political power no longer carry authority. More importantly, zombies *are* normality: everyday Americans reconstituted as monsters (a transformation which can happen at anytime to anyone). The difference is that their response to the frameworks of 'normality' operates in excess: they attack and consume family members and return to shopping malls in crowds, insistently fulfilling capitalist consumerism even though it is (or should be) irrelevant to a post-apocalyptic society.

Romero is now well established as one of American horror's great auteurs, and *Night of the Living Dead* is certainly a member of the horror canon (if we can use this term in the context of such a disreputable genre). Indeed, Wood's early and continued appreciation of Romero as a progressive filmmaker, rather than



just a director of low-budget horror movies, has been of major importance to the critical acceptance of his work. This is captured prominently in his appreciation of the relationship between Romero's zombie films: 'although certain motifs recur and are developed [through *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*][...] Romero never repeats himself'.<sup>10</sup> For Wood, Romero is a filmmaker who remains in dialogue with America and the filmmaking industry (a point which holds particular poignancy in consideration of the importance of different media forms in *Diary of the Dead*): 'one must see the films historically, in terms of Romero's changing responses to changes in American society and technology'.<sup>11</sup>

The central ambivalence of Romero's zombie films, the ambiguities and tensions he invites us to see in making the implications surrounding the material proximity between us and them so chilling and revealing, is encompassed not only in the zombies' closeness to normality, but also in the rejection of what constitutes normality by the most sympathetic human protagonists: 'The characters [...] are valued precisely according to their potential to distinguish themselves from the zombies, their ability to demonstrate that the zombies are not "us"'.<sup>12</sup> Considering the need of the survivors' to break free from normality (the frameworks of nuclear family, capitalist culture and military power) it is entirely fitting that none of the films, despite the relative hopefulness of the endings of *Dawn of the Dead* and *Land of the Dead*, conclude by fulfilling potential romantic unions, or by wiping out the zombie threat.

In order to consider the ambivalence in the relationship between normality and the monster—that central and most important component of Wood's horror criticism—created by Romero's zombies, I will focus my analysis on the materiality of the films through close attention to the bodies on-screen. In doing so, my aim is to follow Wood's dedication to the close reading of film, his ambition and commitment to considering 'the force of the images on the screen'.<sup>13</sup> Another significant piece of Wood's writing in this respect is his article 'Acting Up' (one of the few early considerations of film acting, a subject that has only relatively recently become of importance to the discipline), in which he recognises the significance of the body and how we are invited to see it to the understanding and evaluation of performance, in his appraisal of Susan George's performance in *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975): 'The impossibility of Blanche's situation, the absence of any conceivable resolution, her own limitations of awareness, the anguish of her growing desperation, are conveyed as much through the actress as by her'.<sup>14</sup> My concerns are similarly tied to the ways in which Romero's films elaborate evolving articulations of and attitudes towards the bodies of living and undead through their stylistic strategies. There are essential developments in the *feel* of each film, which correspond to these evolutions in the material relationship between living and undead. Wood draws attention to the way the differences in tone are constituted by the textural changes in format/colour palette in the first three films:

**'For a start, there is the very marked difference of tone, established most obviously by the broad differences of format: grainy black-and-white for *Night of the Living Dead*, bright lighting, garish colors, lavish décor for *Dawn of the Dead*, subdued lighting, drab colors, a totally depleted décor for *Day of the Dead*'.<sup>15</sup>**

By looking in detail at moments from *Night of the Living Dead*, *Day of the Dead* and *Land of the Dead*, I hope to draw together Wood's interests in horror and style by exploring how these differences of feel and mood indicate the development of Romero's attitude to the embodiment of the zombies.

The tensions set up in the opposition and paralleling of the living and undead, are actualised most poignantly through the characters we experience as both. Central characters become zombies, each one's subsequent return revealing attitudes to the frameworks of 'normal' society—family, race and class—that invite us to question these structures: Johnny (Russell Streiner) is killed at the start of *Night of the Dead*, and later arrives at the farmhouse apparently looking for his sister Barbra (Judith O'Dea); Stephen (David Emge) in *Dawn of the Dead* emerges from a zombie attack transformed, then proceeds to lead the other zombies through the shopping mall to a partition concealing entrance to the humans' living quarters; Cholo (John Leguizamo) in *Land of the Dead* is bitten, but refuses to be shot, returning to attack villainous tycoon Kaufman (Dennis Hopper). Romero reminds us of their closeness to their previous lives by specifically illuminating physical responses or gestures to focus our recognition of the human, which equally foregrounds their differences. For example, Johnny's gloved hand appears in the foreground of the frame making him recognisable in the crowd of ghouls. Such moments of transformation seem to directly question whether our engagement with these figures, whom we were aligned to or sympathetic with as people, automatically stops when they become zombies, and what responses we are being asked to have to the change. We are certainly invited to remain emotionally concerned with these transformed characters, whether through fear for others, as with Johnny or Stephen, or complicity, as with Cholo's act of revenge against Kaufman.

In life Cholo deals in blackmarket goods, looted from long abandoned shops, for Kaufman, who has financial control over the zombie-besieged society which has become polarised through the latter's plutocratic rule (the rich white class live in a shopping mall/apartment complex which attempts to hermetically seal in 'normal' life, while everyone else occupies slums located outside it). Kaufman makes it clear that while he is happy to buy goods from Cholo he does not consider him a social equal. Cholo's toughness is expressed through dialogue as well as his muscled body and ease with a weapon. The way the character is positioned, physically, socially and narratively, and most immediately by his name, dramatises specifically racialised representations of Latin-Americans in North American culture, belonging to the working, and more specifically service, class as well as to gang culture. That Cholo chooses to be left to turn when he is bitten by a zombie is unsurprising but also resonates with the tension the film implies between integration and social alienation. He responds to his companion's offer to shoot him by saying, 'I've always wanted to see how the other half lives'. Cholo's transformation, more than any other in Romero's films, dramatises the racialised notion of zombies and thus the films' addressal of their relationship to exploitation and slavery. He finally acknowledges what is already apparent to us: he will never be accepted by society as he is already 'Other'. That he seeks out Kaufman for revenge, in light of the representation of his human self, becomes a highly evocative subversion of this racial articulation of the zombie, the slave attacking the master.





*Diary of the Dead* (2007)





Zombie-Cholo appears only to Kaufman, entering the basement car park where he is attempting to escape from the zombies' attack on the city, and it is significant to Kaufman's previous treatment of Cholo that he doesn't immediately recognise him as undead. Zombie-Cholo is first presented silhouetted in shadow, elements of his physical shape and clothes making his identity clear, while his awkward movements alone indicate his change. Kaufman's response, having been shot at by Cholo, is to shoot him, repeatedly doing so until the zombie, still hidden in shadow, collapses by a pillar. Kaufman, satisfied that he has killed the "Spic bastard", returns to his bags of money. That Kaufman doesn't initially recognise the change, even though we might (knowing that he has been bitten), invites us to consider at first glance how physically similar human and zombie might be. Nonetheless, the weight of Cholo's change is placed within his material differences, manifested predominantly in the stiffened quality of Leguizamo's movement. That his difference is manifested in the body rather than the mind, corresponds to the articulation of his desire to destroy Kaufman being as strong in death as in life, and therefore response to Cholo is not dramatically changed by his transformation. To be more specific, engagement is altered, but only because his being a zombie allows us to take pleasure in Cholo's power to destroy Kaufman (a response qualified by his attempt, when human, to blow up the entire human city because of his dispute with the same), which he does shortly afterwards.

Although, I agree with Wood's observation that, 'Land is the weakest of the first four films (Hopper and the black zombie apart, its characters are not very interesting, and too much of the first half merely repeats the now-familiar slaughter)' I would argue that Cholo's reincarnation as a zombie warrants attention, for the way in which it dramatises tensions of race and class in modern America.<sup>16</sup> The return of that which the middle-class white society of the film has repressed is realised with violent and deadly consequences, which directly invites the celebration of ambivalence that Wood indicated as critical to the progressive horror film.

By moving back to the beginning of the series, we can start to see that a fuller understanding of the kind of ambivalence embedded in Romero's construction of zombies in *Land of the Dead* evolves from a primarily physical approach to strategies of presentation. At first there is no reason to think the first zombie (Bill Heinzman) in *Night of the Living Dead* is anything other than human. Seen in the distance, apparently a shuffling old man or tramp, it is not until Barbra walks towards him, wanting to apologise for Johnny's joking around, that the man abruptly attacks her and his essential difference to the living becomes apparent. The struggles that ensue, between Barbra and the zombie, and then Johnny and the zombie, which end in Johnny's death and Barbra's escape, are filmed using a handheld camera, which follows the movement of the performers so closely, largely in close-up and medium shot framings, that there is a certain amount of disorientation over who is where and what is going on, making the scene stylistically complex.

The close-up is often a moment of revelation, as it can present full access to the subtlest expressions. Yet many of the close-ups employed here obscure expressivity, because of the camera's closeness details of the action are difficult to pin down as Johnny clings to the zombie, the two locked in an awkward grappling hold. The rapidity of the bodies shifting in and out of the frame,

intensified by the editing and camera movement, renders the close-up unable to capture anything much. The confusion of which body we are seeing in the struggle, while contributing to anxiety over what will happen, also disrupts a clear sense of alignment or allegiance to a particular body. Even when they stagger slightly away from the camera, which makes it easier to see that the zombie appears to be overpowering Johnny, the close physical resemblance of Streiner and Heinzman underlines the difficulty of distinguishing them. The chaotic feel of the cinematic treatment of this moment in *Night of the Living Dead* invokes sustained bodily conflict. The film's tone is grounded in affective response, the 'feel' of a film. Here the only discernable difference between human and zombie is communicated through the slight stiffness of the Heinzman's body (there is no special make-up).

During the struggle there are moments in which the film cuts to shots away from the action, which principally serve to maintain our anxiety. Once Barbra is freed from the zombie by Johnny, she runs out of the way to a headstone, positioning herself against it. Access to Judith O'Dea's face registers concern over the action off-screen, as she grimaces and audibly inhales. By cutting to her the film leads us to experience events through another body. After the zombie kills Johnny, their struggle ending with the zombie knocking Johnny's head against a tombstone, the film again cuts back to a medium shot of O'Dea, still in the same position as she shrinks back against the headstone and cries out 'Johnny!'. O'Dea's physical tension in this moment—the way she grips the headstone and presses herself against it—qualifies the full extent of what is at stake; the failure of familial and gender dynamics to protect her, and the vulnerability of her body. As we share her position of watching, our bodies are alerted to be similarly anxious.

The stylistic strategies through which we experience the zombie ensure that he is dynamically present and forceful. There is no chance of epistemic access but we intuitively understand the impetus his physicality communicates. Moreover, the lack of dialogue in the scene means that we have no choice but to pay attention to the bodies on-screen in order to comprehend their interaction, and, more disturbingly, to recognise their closeness. Tension is provided by the score and editing, but also through physicality—encapsulated in the kinetic or textural clash and correspondence of the performers' bodies and their presentation.

The visceral nature of zombie embodiment is carried through to *Day of the Dead*, the first of Romero's films to present a zombie as a character in its own right: Bub (Howard Sherman) is the subject of scientific research. However, in relation to the sequence from *Night of the Living Dead*, Bub's introduction is presented in a much more stylistically straightforward manner. As scientists Sarah (Lori Cardille), Logan (Richard Liberty) and Ted (John Amplas), watch from the other side of an observation window, Bub—stood in front of a metal table, a filthy wall behind him and an old-fashioned microphone hanging over him—reacts to three objects that Logan has given him: a toothbrush, razor and book. The central dynamic of the sequence is Bub's interaction with the objects, presented in relation to the scientists' reactions. In coherence with this the scene is dramatised in three principal static set-ups repeated substantially throughout: a medium shot of the scientists watching Bub from inside their observation suite; a medium close-up of Howard Sherman as Bub interacts with the objects; a long shot of Sherman from inside the





*Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

observation suite, which reveals the details of Bub's surroundings and the reflection of the scientists watching. A significant result of this is that, in comparison with Heinzman's portrayal of the first zombie, Sherman's embodiment of Bub is signalled more obviously as a crafted performance, and at the same time is more complex in terms of epistemic position and sympathy. As such, attention to Romero's presentation of Bub provides an opportunity to think further about the material tensions inherent to the zombie, the nature of the ambivalence created by this, and the development in what kind of relationship with the zombie the film invites.

There is a moment in the scene, after Bub has examined the toothbrush and thrown it away, when he interacts with the razor. The film cuts from the scientists to Bub, a medium close-up placing emphasis on his face, who is holding a razor in his hand and staring intently at it. He then presses it to his cheek and looks forwards, moves the razor to another place on his cheek and then looks forward again. On the second look Sherman's expression registers surprise, his gaze suddenly more focused in front of him, and the film cuts to Bub's optical point of view, a mirror on the wall opposite revealing him in it, with various scientific apparatus cluttering the frame below it. As Bub looks at himself in the mirror, his body wobbles slightly and the razor drops down his cheek. The film then cuts to the long shot of Sherman, with Richard Liberty and Lori Cardille reflected in the glass, their

expressions registering pleasure and astonishment. When the film returns to the medium close-up of Sherman, he has turned his face slightly and is beginning to draw the razor down his cheek, as though shaving. As Bub shaves some of his skin rips, and on a second stroke some of it comes off. Bub stares down at the razor and examines the skin, then slowly sticking his thumb in his mouth. With this his hand holding the razor drops, putting it back on the table, and drool falls out of his mouth.

The stylistic simplicity of the scene means that we get a great deal of access to Sherman, which is repaid with material detail: the close-ups reveal subtle changes in expression and gesture. Indeed, *because* of the close-up there is limited access to his whole body, so much of the performance is relayed through facial expression and hand gesture, communicating Bub's experience of the objects. This powerfully draws out his humanity, we are not distracted by his awkward body and it is easier to see him as more human—aided too by the minimal amount of decomposition (i.e. special effects make-up) evident on Sherman's face—and therefore to interpret his actions. Nevertheless, the close-up also reveals his textural differences, the flatness and disintegration of skin, the lack of controlled elasticity in his face, which create a tension in his apparently human movements and emotional reactions. By witnessing the detail of Bub's gestures we are invited to see and respond to him as becoming more human, as a result of his contact with Logan. He doesn't just shave his face as he used to, but reacts to the new effect of the razor on his skin, and thus radically goes against the conception of the zombie as having no phenomenal consciousness. The physicalised anxiety of this moment, the razor graphically peeling flesh, makes this an occasion when we're most likely to feel a physical connection with Bub. At the same time, that Bub doesn't physically react to it in the same way we might underlines that he *is* different: if we wince, or physically squirm at his ripped skin, our actions do not mirror his.

This is the first occasion of the representation of a zombie moving away from emptiness, and as such goes against conventions of how we see him, and what we experience of him. The texture of Sherman's performance is certainly in this sense markedly different to that of Heinzman. The distinction in visual treatment foregrounds a key change, in that Heinzman is being followed by a camera, whereas Sherman is performing to one that is able to capture and centralise the minute details of his expression, which are also foregrounded by lighting and the use of colour stock. It is important to remember in concert with this that the set-ups used here have important differences, and as such are designed to evoke a range of responses to Bub: when he is shown in close-up we are in the same space as him, and when he is shown from further away we see him from inside the scientists' observation room. As a result, closeness and attention to texture is continually held in balance with a more analytical view, reminding us he is the subject of research, or perhaps even a religious view, if we consider the framework on the wall behind him evocative of a crucifix. Of course, both of these views are from the same position, so that we are continually looking from the same physical position as the scientists, but there seems to be an important tension created through the degrees of our awareness of alignment with them.

Unlike the first zombie in *Night of the Living Dead*, Bub is shown to have interiority and point of view—a step which exemplifies Romero's approach to the zombie as something more than



"motorised instinct" (as articulated by Dr Milliard Rausch (Richard France) in a televised interview at the beginning of *Dawn of the Dead*). We briefly share the same spatial perspective as a zombie, the closest connection between us and them, which is surely an indicator of how much Romero wants us to engage with him, and, accordingly, of how close he sees the zombies to the living. At the end of their observation Logan excitedly comments "He remembers. He remembers everything that he used to". Bub remembers, but through attention to the details of expression and gesture it seems that Bub not only remembers the objects, but has feelings about them—signalled by his expression of disregard for the toothbrush and later palpable desire for the book, which he grasps and peers at intently. The clarity afforded Sherman's performance invites us to connect his actions as implicitly expressive of thought and feeling, as opposed to the first zombie's dynamic movement, suggestive of a more basic compulsion. He is battling against his emptiness, against the numbness of his embodiment: he can feel, just differently to us. Bub is special because he refrains from attacking Logan, understanding himself through Logan's treatment of him. Here the presentation of Sherman's body qualifies our emotional response to Bub and enables us to be sympathetic for, rather than anxious of the monster. As such, the tone of Bub's embodiment offers a different balance of emptiness and excess that, while challenging in relation to our expectations of zombies, is less fraught with grotesque disorder. Most importantly, sympathy is offered in the texture of Sherman's performance, particularly in the way he emphasises Bub's childlike qualities—his wide staring eyes, the tactility of his interaction with the objects, his grunting communication.

The achievement of sympathy for Bub is a key continuation point from him to the main zombie of *Land of the Dead*, 'Big Daddy' (Eugene Clarke), through whom Romero's construction of zombie embodiment comes full circle. As he is portrayed by an African-American actor, Big Daddy represents the dynamic progression of another motif in the films, the centrality of a dynamic black male protagonist. Early on in the film it is established that the human hunting parties are able to distract the zombies by letting off fireworks, and that Big Daddy alone has realised that this is a trick. Whilst his fellow zombies stare at the sky, he moves amongst them groaning and trying to distract them. The way in which Big Daddy responds to the humans' actions demonstrates that he has moved beyond Bub's tentative physical and conceptual existence. Whereas Bub seems to understand himself through others treatment of him, Big Daddy's independent movement and ability to reject human activity, show that he is in full control of his embodiment, and his inner life. As the humans drive past they fire off bullets, killing zombies. Big Daddy growls in frustration and moves more quickly through the gathered zombies, throwing them out of the way of the humans' guns as he does so.

The action implies that he understands things for himself, and appreciably through interaction with, and observation of, his fellow zombies. His movement through the space invites alignment with him, and the foregrounding of his reactions in close or medium shots, as well as their clarity of expression, encourages sympathy with him over the humans and their random destruction. The measured access given to Eugene Clark as he moves about the space, invites us to understand his responses, and consequently the question of whether he holds interiority is not as

fraught. Whereas Bub seems to understand himself through others treatment of him, Big Daddy's independent movement and ability to reject human activity, show that he is in full control of his embodiment, and his inner life. In recognition of this his presence is not treated differently from the humans by the film. In spite of any anxieties we might feel on behalf of the human characters, Clark's performance offers the final progression of monstrous ambivalence, implying that full sympathy in *Land of the Dead* lies with the zombies, and that we are asked to respond to them as explicitly oppressed. Moreover, by transposing a human figure who has become central to the series into a zombie body, Romero further underlines the similarity between the living and the dead in a way that understands the accumulation of what has gone on in the previous three films. That he can physically interact and learn, is a significant step forwards in overcoming his oppressors (the humans), and therefore a turning point in the manner in which the zombies' representation is materially addressing our sense of what is at stake, for both humans and zombies.

'If we can't find the "soul" of a work of art expressed in its body, informing and giving life to every limb, then we may be pretty sure it is not worth looking for'.<sup>17</sup> The words of Robin Wood quoted here speak to the materiality of film, and to synthesis between style and meaning. Taken from one of his earliest pieces of criticism, they also communicate his lasting commitment to being responsive to and involved by the expressive achievements of cinema, in all its diversity. For me, they also evoke the sense that films are peopled, and that meaning is expressed through the bodies of those on-screen. In Romero's films, zombies' actions are centred on revealing what constitutes ourselves, doing so by drawing attention to the body and addressing its boundaries (that which is usually repressed), evoking physical anxiety through the spectacle of the violent destruction of bodies, and in the realisation of our own potential emptiness.

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#### NOTES

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- 2 Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 14.
- 3 Robin Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," in *Film Comment* 13: 1 (1977), 47.
- 4 Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," 10.
- 5 Wood, "Introduction to the American Horror Film," 15.
- 6 Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," 47.
- 7 Robin Wood, "Neglected Nightmares," in *Film Comment* 16:2 (1980), 25.
- 8 Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 108.
- 9 Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 83.
- 10 Robin Wood, "The Woman's Nightmare: Masculinity in *Day of the Dead*" in *CineAction!* 6 (1986), 45.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 47.
- 13 Wood, *Hitchcock's Films*, 9.
- 14 Robin Wood, "Acting up," in *Film Comment* 12: 2 (1976), 23.
- 15 Wood, "The Woman's Nightmare," 45.
- 16 Wood, "Fresh Meat," 29.
- 17 Wood, *Hitchcock's Films*, 17.



# The Literary Critic, the Nineteenth Century Novel and ***THE WIRE***

by GARRY WATSON

In the two years since *The Wire* concluded, a pitched battle of ongoing praise has upped the comparative ante. If likening Simon repeatedly to Dickens and Dreiser, Balzac and Tolstoy and Shakespeare hasn't proved adequately exalting, Bill Moyers lately freshened things up by calling Simon "our Edward Gibbon," while the literary critic Walter Benn Michaels went so far as to suggest that the beauty and difficulty of watching *The Wire* in English—the multifarious 21st-century English of Baltimore detectives and drug dealers—compares with that of reading Dante in 14th-century Italian.

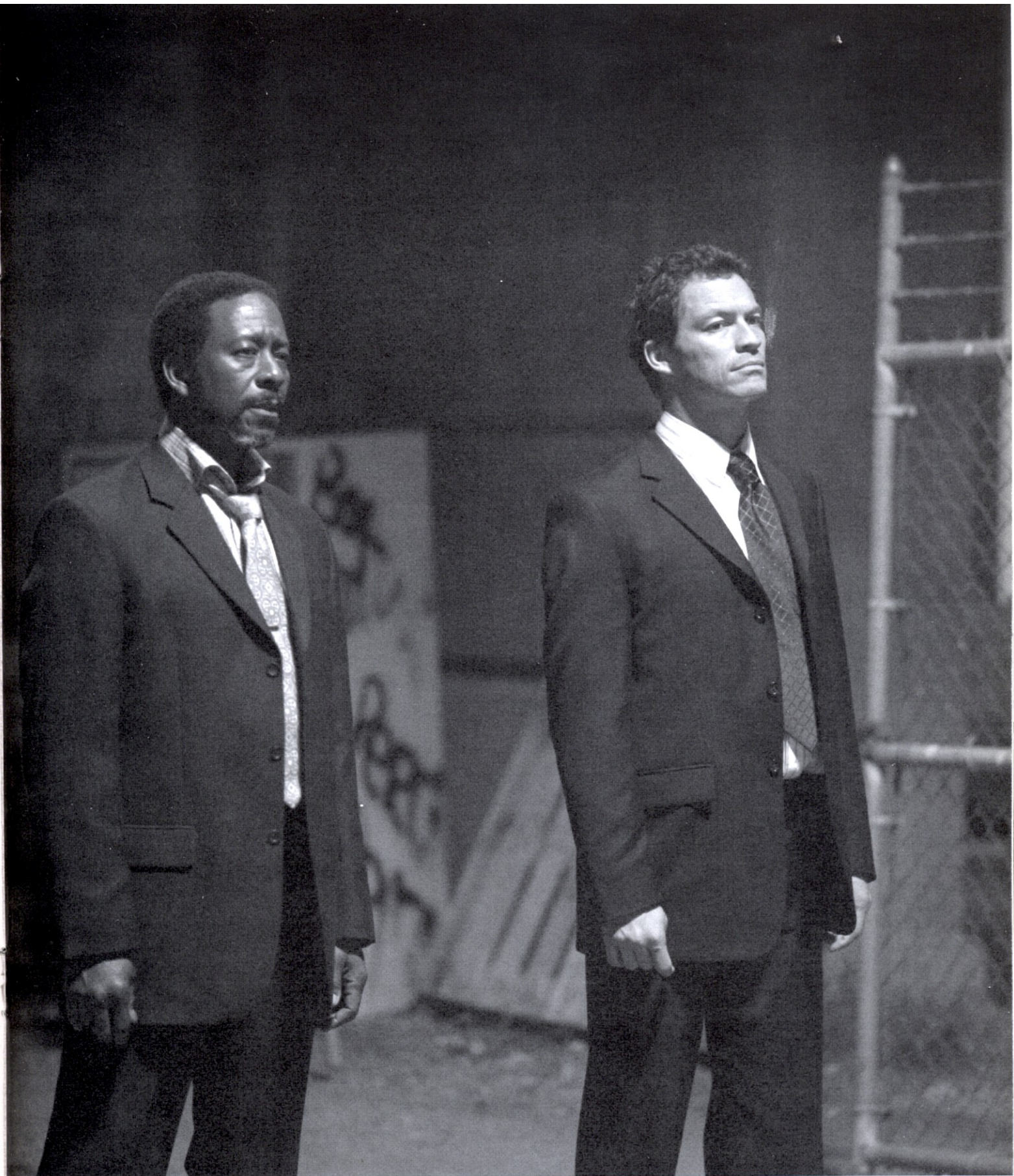
—Wyatt Mason<sup>1</sup>

How good is *The Wire*? Can it really be *that* good? Given the kind of praise it has already received, it might seem that the duty of the critic is now to lower the ante, to speak more soberly, to make more modest claims. But my own feeling is that the excitement it has generated is entirely justified. So what I personally think we need is a willingness first to explain as clearly as we can the nature of our excitement; then to make precisely the claim it seems appropriate to make on the show's behalf (regardless as to how modest or extravagant it might seem); and finally to make a more detailed and convincing argument for its overall



from left to right: Duquan ("Dukie") Weems, Randy Wagstaff, Michael Lee and Namond Brice in school (Season 4)





Detectives Lester Freamon and Jimmy McNulty—driven to desperate measures (Season 5)



achievement than has so far been forthcoming.<sup>2</sup> However, considering the extraordinary length of *The Wire*, all I can hope to do here is lay the groundwork for that necessarily detailed argument, which I will have to make elsewhere.

I think I can best describe the excitement I myself started to experience at some point during my first viewing of the first season by saying that it reminded me of what I had felt in the mid-1960s when eagerly waiting for and then watching the films of Jean Luc Godard. But I also have in mind in this connection the importance of D.H.Lawrence and of the early T.S.Eliot (the Eliot of "The Wasteland") to the literary critic, F.R.Leavis. Something new had arrived, expectations about what could realistically be attempted had been changed, and it was no longer possible to go on thinking and writing in the old way. Not, at least, if one understood the happening in question as I think Leavis understood it, which is to say as the kind of "truth-event" the philosopher Alan Badiou has recently theorized. To take Badiou's example: "Berg and Webern, faithful to the musical event known by the name of 'Schoenberg,' cannot continue with *fin-de-siècle* neo-Romanticism as if nothing had happened."<sup>3</sup> If Berg and Webern *had* continued in the old ways "as if nothing had happened," then for them—since they had not

been faithful to it—"Schoenberg" would *not* have constituted a truth-event. And I would say that for Leavis much the same applied to those writers who came after T.S.Eliot and D.H.Lawrence.

Of course many writers (many good writers) did come after T.S.Eliot and D.H.Lawrence, just as many films (some of them outstanding) continued (and continue) to be made after Godard's *Weekend* proclaimed the End of Cinema in 1967. I am not saying that just because most of those writers and film-makers were not obviously indebted to the breakthroughs we associate with Eliot, Lawrence and Godard, their work is without value. What I *am* saying is that I do believe it makes sense to see these three as belonging to a select band of artists whose work changes one's sense of what is possible—and possible, incidentally, not just (or even mainly) in art: after full exposure to the work of artists like these, the world looks and in some sense *is* different. That's how I feel after watching *The Wire*. And the fact that its audience was much larger than the number of readers or viewers who greeted the poems, novels and films of T.S.Eliot, Lawrence and Godard respectively strikes me as an encouraging sign in the first decade of a new century, at a moment when one had long given up expecting anything of this magnitude.

Left to right; Gus Haynes, Mike Fletcher, Alma Gutierrez and Scott Templeton (newsroom in Season 5)





I trust this already goes some way towards explaining why an essay on the significance of *The Wire* seemed an appropriate choice for this special issue. But for the benefit of any readers who may be unaware of the fact, I am of course thinking here of the great importance Robin Wood attached to the example set by the literary criticism of F.R. Leavis. As admirers of Wood's work know well, his own unique form of criticism (as it evolved over the last few decades) was characterized by the heroic manner in which it attempted to combine a Leavisian emphasis on close reading and evaluation with a kind of political radicalism that bears some resemblance to what can be found at work in *The Wire* (the kind, in Wood's case, that drew on Marxism, Feminism and his experience as a gay man).<sup>4</sup>

Now before going any further, I need to say something about the kind of thing we are talking about here. My epigraph comes from a recent article, whose title, "The HBO *Auteur*," refers to David Simon. It seems to me right to think of Simon as the series' *auteur*, even though he didn't direct any of *The Wire*'s sixty episodes. But that said, the first thing I think we have to reflect on is Simon's insistence that *The Wire* came out of an "impulse" that was "either journalistic or literary."<sup>5</sup> Or to be more exact, the impulse in question was *both* journalistic and literary. It was journalistic in the sense that it draws heavily on the research or field-work that went into the "long, multi-POV nonfiction narratives, *Homicide* (1991) and *The Corner* (1997)" ("An Interview" 383), the latter co-written with Ed Burns.<sup>6</sup> And as for the literary component of the impulse, we can note the obvious pride Simon takes in explaining (in *The Wire: Truth etc.*) why it was appropriate to have the novelist Richard Price as one of his writers:

Anyone who has read *Clockers*—which is to the cocaine epidemic of the early 1990s as *The Grapes of Wrath* is to the Dust Bowl—understands the debt owed to that remarkable book by *The Wire*. Indeed the split point-of-view that powers *The Wire* is a form mastered first in the modern novel, and Price, in his first Dempsey book, proved beyond all doubt how much nuance, truth, and story could exist between the world of the police and the world of their targets. ("Introduction" 26)

However, when Simon invites us to think of *The Wire* in literary terms, he isn't only thinking of the novel:

We're stealing ... from ... the Greeks—lifting our thematic stance wholesale from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality. ("An Interview" 384)

This too, I take, as I have no doubt Simon intends it to be taken, with the utmost seriousness.

But is the fact that Simon is an author and also that he had a hand in the writing of *all* the episodes in Seasons One, Two, Three and Five, and in four of the episodes in Season Four of *The Wire*,<sup>7</sup> enough to make him also an *auteur*? It seems to me that the answer to this is Yes, on two counts. Yes, first, if we accept (as I think we should) Simon's contention that "In episodic television,

by virtue of the continuing storylines, it's the writer with the suction" ("Introduction" 26). Or, in other words: "Beginning with *Oz* and culminating in *The Sopranos*, the best work on HBO expresses nothing less than the vision of individual writers, as expressed through the talents of directors, actors, and film crews" (2). And Yes, secondly, if (as I take to be the case here) the writer in question gets to do what no-one else gets to do, which is to oversee every single episode and ensure that from beginning to end *The Wire* looks as if it is the work of one single director.

As it happens, Robert Colesberry, the man to whom Simon gives most credit for the look of *The Wire*, only directed one episode (2.12.25) but he is the one who apparently did more than anyone else to create "the template" (29) that remained the same after he died in 2004 from heart surgery complications. But in this connection the point that I think needs stressing is that it isn't possible to tell one director's contribution from another's. Nor, I would wager, for that matter, is it possible to tell one writer's contribution from another writer's. Since I particularly admire some of the films made by Agnieszka Holland and some of Richard Price's novels, I have paid special attention to their contributions (including the episode [3.8.33] they worked on together), but in my view the episodes in question are neither better nor worse than any of the others. And while some may be

Detective "Bunk" Moreland





inclined to take this as a put-down of Price and Holland, I myself see it, rather, as further confirmation of the uniformly high standard maintained throughout.

Here I want to draw on Chris Marker, even though when he offered the following judgment he was speaking of two other TV series (*Deadwood* and *Firefly*) as well as *The Wire* (and even though he could, at that point, have seen very little of the latter):

**There is a knowledge in them, a sense of story and economy, of ellipsis, a science of framing and of cutting, a dramaturgy, and an acting style that has no equal anywhere, and certainly not in Hollywood.<sup>8</sup>**

So yes, while it is convenient (and as fair, I imagine, as these things ever are) to think of David Simon as the *auteur*, it is clear that the “knowledge” Marker refers to here belongs jointly to both him and the collectivity (the group of professionals) that works under him. What, I suggest, this particular experiment in film may force us to realize is that (over and above their other more obvious contributions) writers may also deserve more credit than they are usually given (sometimes perhaps as much credit as editors) for such things as, for example, “a science of framing and of cutting,” which is crucial in *The Wire*. And in addition to this, what there ought to be no doubt about at all is the absolutely major contribution made by the actors.

In short, while it is certainly important to register the fact that *The Wire* exists as a new kind of film, it is at least equally important to recognize that this series clearly sees itself as being primarily inspired by and indebted to literature.<sup>9</sup>

This brings me to the twofold claim I now wish to make on its behalf: first, that the great achievement of *The Wire* should be primarily understood in terms of how powerfully it challenges us to rethink our ethics; second, that we will be better able to appreciate its ethical teaching—and respond to its challenge—if we see some of the things it has in common with, and also some of the ways in which it differs from, a certain tradition of the novel. Though the second part of this claim is likely to seem unsurprising at first (both in the light of what I have just been saying and particularly since the most frequently made comparisons are probably to the nineteenth century novel), the novels I mainly have in mind are decidedly *not* the ones usually thought of in this context. But I’ll return to this in a moment. First, I need to acknowledge some of the reasons why it might well seem a mistake to argue for *The Wire* in terms of what it can teach us about ethics. As I see it, there are three main ones: (i) some of Simon’s own remarks, (ii) the Marxist reason and (iii) the Greek.

The first reason it might seem a mistake to see *The Wire* in terms of a radical, and radically challenging, ethical enquiry is that David Simon has sometimes given the impression that he, at least, would find this a somewhat naïve misrepresentation of what *The Wire* has to offer. I’m thinking here, for example, of his pointing out that in contrast to “so much of television” which “is about providing catharsis and redemption and the triumph of character,” *The Wire* is “a drama in which postmodern institutions trump individuality and morality and justice” (“An Interview” 385). But while there is indeed a sense in which it can be said that *The Wire* does show “postmodern institutions trump[ing] individuality and morality and justice,” this only

means that many (but not all) of the efforts to do the right thing that we see being made by individuals and groups throughout the series end in failure. This certainly doesn’t invalidate those efforts: it simply means that *The Wire* inclines towards a tragic view of the world it depicts.

But let’s look at another of the comments Simon has made in a similar vein. Explaining how he pitched the idea of the show to HBO executives, he offers this summary:

**Instead of the usual good-guys-chasing-bad-guys framework, questions would be raised about the very labels of good and bad, and, indeed, whether such distinctly moral notions were really the point.**

**The show would instead be about untethered capitalism run amok, about how power and money actually root themselves in a postmodern American city, and, ultimately, about why we as an urban people are no longer able to solve our problems or heal our wounds.** (“An Interview” 386)

How should we take this? I agree, on the one hand, that *The Wire* does present a vitally important argument; it argues that capitalism is running amok and it shows us some of the consequences, in the workplace and elsewhere. And I can certainly see why Simon would want to stress this aspect, especially since I find Season Five’s “depiction of what remains of our media culture, a critique that makes plain why hardly anyone is left to do the hard work of explaining the precise nature of our national problems” (“Introduction” 12), so difficult to refute. Especially too since what that means is that it is certainly possible “we as an urban people” may be “no longer able to solve our problems or heal our wounds.” A genuinely scary prospect. But, on the other hand, while I also agree both that *The Wire* raises “questions ... about the very labels of good and bad,” I would insist that it shows “such distinctly moral notions” to still be very much to “the point”; indeed, that it shows them to be absolutely indispensable.

The second reason it might seem a mistake to see *The Wire* as ethical enquiry is the presence of a kind of Marxism at work in it. On the one hand, I am thinking here of such statements, by Simon, as the following:

***The Wire* depicts a world in which capital has triumphed completely, labor has been marginalized and monied interests have purchased enough political infrastructure to prevent reform. It is a world in which the rules and values of the free market and maximized profit have been mistaken for a social framework, a world where institutions themselves are paramount and every day human beings matter less.** (“Introduction” 30)

On the other, I think too of the relevance to *The Wire* of the last sentence of Norman Mailer’s (problematic but still, in places, challenging) 1957 essay, “The White Negro”; in particular, of Mailer’s characterization of Marxism as a form of thought that “approach[es] the mystery of social cruelty so simply and practically as to say that we are a collective body of humans whose life-energy is wasted, displaced, and procedurally stolen as it



passes from one of us to another)" (my italics). But why do I think this might be taken to argue against the idea that *The Wire* should be primarily seen as a work of ethical teaching and enquiry? Because there has always been a tendency in Marxism—one among others, admittedly, but particularly noticeable, I would say, in many of its proponents in the universities in the 1970s—to argue that ethical questions should be postponed until after the revolution; in other words, to replace ethics by politics.<sup>10</sup>

The third reason is the presence within *The Wire* of the kind of vision we associate with Greek tragedy. Thus, after making the remark we have already noted ("we're still fated by indifferent gods"), Simon adds this:

**But instead of the old gods, *The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason. ("An Interview" 384)**

Why should one try to do the right thing if the outcome is "fated" anyhow? On the face of it, it would seem that here too we have a perspective that casts doubt on the feasibility of any meaningful ethical intervention. And yet, perhaps not. After all, this reflection hardly applies to a tragedy like *Antigone*, a work that seems to me especially relevant to *The Wire*.

I come now to the second part of my claim, which is that we can begin to get into clearer focus the tradition *The Wire* recovers by recalling two of the ways in which, in his book *The Great Tradition*, F.R. Leavis characterized the achievement of the great English novelists: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Why is this bound, at first glance, to seem so improbable? Isn't it mainly because of the great differences between the worlds of Simon's West Baltimore and (to restrict ourselves just to Austen and Eliot) those of Highbury, say, or of Middlemarch? But of course it is also true that the Westside of Baltimore is vastly different to the Lake Woebegone of Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*, which we hear on a car radio at the beginning of Season Two, as Bodie (the young drug-slinger, played by J.D. Williams) finds himself leaving Baltimore for the first time in his life (and being obliged to listen to a new radio station). And my point is that the world of *The Wire* turns out to have one thing—something crucially important—in common with the worlds of Highbury and Middlemarch that outweighs the real and obvious differences.

Before moving to a conclusion, I think I had better offer a few more clarifications. First, I am not denying the possibility that Balzac, Dante and certain Russian novelists could all be used to help us better understand *The Wire* too. It isn't difficult to see why Richard Price refers to "the Russian novel of an HBO series, *The Wire*."<sup>11</sup>

Second, though I am not forgetting that *The Wire* is a profoundly American work, I am suggesting that George Eliot and Leavis can probably help us with *The Wire* more than someone like Dreiser because, while not unimportant, the naturalism that *The Wire* shares with him (or with Zola, say) is finally less significant than the ethical concern it shares with the two English

writers (ethical concern, as distinct, for example, from their significantly different ethical commitments). Without wishing to deny certain obvious similarities, I think, incidentally, it would be a serious mistake to see *The Wire* as a work of naturalism. (There is a great deal that needs to be said about this but I will limit myself here to pointing out that much of what gives *The Wire* its great distinction is attributable to how stylized and unnaturalistic it often is, as in the miraculous-seeming escape from death of Omar Little [the gay, Robin-Hood-like outlaw figure played by Michael K. Williams] after he has been forced to jump from a balcony high-up on an apartment building. As drug lord, Marlo Stanfield [played by Jamie Hector] comments: "Some spiderman shit there" [5.6.56].)

We can now say a little more about the one thing (its intense ethical concern) that I am claiming *The Wire* has in common with the novels of writers like Austen, George Eliot and Dickens. To begin with, let's look at a couple of the key points Leavis made in his book *The Great Tradition* and consider their bearing on *The Wire*. First, there is his claim that Jane Austen, George Eliot and Joseph Conrad (and he was later to add D.H. Lawrence and Dickens to the list) "are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life." And secondly, what he says about the connection between their interest in "form" and questions concerning morality (or ethics):

**The great novelists in that tradition are all very much concerned with "form" ... But the peculiar quality of their preoccupation with "form" may be brought out by a contrasting reference to Flaubert. Reviewing Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, D.H. Lawrence adduces Flaubert as figuring to the world the "will of the writer to be greater than and undisputed lord over the stuff he writes." This attitude in art, as Lawrence points out, is indicative of an attitude in life—or towards life. Flaubert, he comments, "stood away from life as from a leprosy" ...**

As a matter of fact, when we examine the formal perfection of *Emma*, we find that it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist's peculiar interest in life ... far from having anything of Flaubert's disgust or disdain or boredom, they [the great English novelists] are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity.<sup>12</sup>

One easy and understandable reaction to this would be to say that if it were possible for either Leavis or the novelists he is celebrating here to have been confronted with some of what *The Wire* has to show us they also would have probably stood away from it "as from a leprosy." Perhaps. Indeed, that may even seem likely but of course in the nature of the case it is not possible to know. In any case, the claim I wish to make is that in *The Wire* too "form" needs to be appreciated in terms of its "moral preoccupations" since *The Wire* also exhibits a comparable "moral intensity."

First and foremost, there is the fact that *The Wire* takes us much more deeply than most of us are likely to have ever gone (or wanted to go) before into the kind of territory that the nar-



rator of E.M.Forster's *Howard's End* refers to as "the abyss where nothing counts":

**The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it, and at times people whom he knew had dropped in, and counted no more.<sup>13</sup>**

It seems natural to be reminded of this by, among other things, something one reporter (Fletcher) says to another (Alma) in the final season of *The Wire* when the latter's story about three murders gets rejected because they occurred in "the wrong zip code": "They're dead where it doesn't count" (5.3.53). And while there are many works to which one can point in the century that followed on from the publication of *Howard's End* (in 1910) that feature occasional characters who wouldn't have counted for Forster's narrator, it would be difficult to think of any work that has as many such characters in it as *The Wire*. Not that quantity is everything here. One might recall, for example,

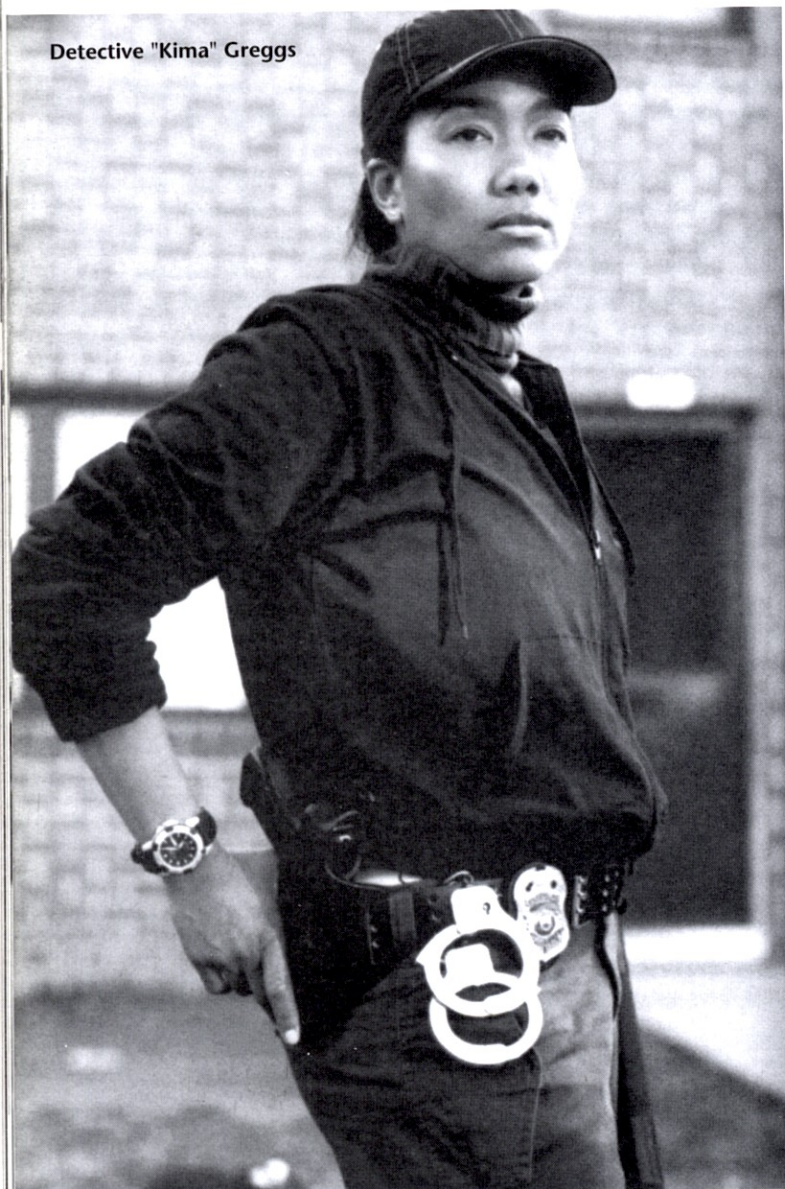
the symbolic importance given to the convict Abel Magwitch in Dickens' *Great Expectations*; of the way in which Pip stands away from Abel when the convict turns up in London at the end of the novel's second part ("The abhorrence in which I held the man ... the repugnance with which I shrank from him"<sup>14</sup>), as if—to use Lawrence's word—Pip is recoiling from a "leprosy"; and of the significance of Pip's finally being able to embrace him (which is to say, of Dickens' bringing these polar opposites, the gentleman and convict, together).

But the point that really needs emphasizing here is how well we get to know (and to care deeply about) a whole range of such hitherto socially insignificant characters (as, for example, D'Angelo [Larry Gilliard Jr], Wallace [Michael B. Jordan], Bodie, Michael [Tristan Wilds], Duquan [Jermaine Crawford], Randy [Maestro Harrell], Naymond [Julito McCullum]—to name just a few of them) in *The Wire*. This is partially explicable in terms of the fact that if, as the narrator of *Middlemarch* maintains, it is true that "any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another,"<sup>15</sup> then it has to be said that the extraordinary length of *The Wire* enables it to make us aware of an even "slow[er] preparation of effects from one life on another." But in addition to this, we should also take note of something George Eliot's narrator says about "character," while reflecting on the doctor Lydgate soon after his arrival in Middlemarch:

**He was certainly a happy fellow at this time: to be seven-and-twenty, without any fixed vices, with a generous resolution that his action should be beneficent, and with ideas in his brain that made life interesting ... He was at a starting-point which makes many a man's career a fine subject for betting, if there were any gentlemen given to that amusement who could appreciate the complicated probabilities of an arduous purpose, with all the possible thwarting and furthering of circumstance, all the niceties of inward balance, by which a man swims and makes his point or else is carried headlong. The risk would remain, even with close knowledge of Lydgate's character; for character too is a process and an unfolding. The man was still in the making, as much as the Middlemarch doctor and immortal discoverer, and there were both virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding. The faults will not, I hope, be a reason for the withdrawal of your interest in him. (157)**

To the best of my knowledge, if we want to arrive at a deep understanding of what it means to speak of "character" as "a process and an unfolding"—or of its being made up (at least initially) of "virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding"—there is no better place to go than to novels of the length and complexity of *Middlemarch*. Only now, with the appearance of *The Wire*, is there somewhere else to point to—not as an alternative but rather as a carrying forward of a tradition.

I would say, furthermore, that when it is understood in this essentially ethical way—as "a process and an unfolding" with both "virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding"—"character" can be seen as another way of talking about "human nature." I realize that this will seem to some a hope-



Detective "Kima" Gregg



lessly outdated concept at best but here again (as on many other points) I am happy to find myself in agreement with Robin Wood. "Certainly," as he said, "bourgeois ideology has attempted to impose its view of human nature as the only one, naturalizing itself and its institutions, passing them off as 'real,' hence unchangeable: this is one of Marxism's great, radical, seminal perceptions" ("Introduction (1989)" 33). But it would be a terrible mistake to jump from this to the conclusion that "there is no such thing as human nature." On the contrary, in fact, "We must repudiate above all the notion that 'human nature' is a construction of bourgeois ideology." But why? Why do we need the kind of understanding of human nature that we find shared by works as different as *Middlemarch* and *The Wire* but also in *King Lear* and in works produced in much earlier periods? Partly, I would say, because, as F.R. Leavis once put it, it is easy to lose sight of the "needs and latent potentialities" that this culturally transmitted understanding makes us aware of, especially easy in view of the fact that "Technological change has ... an implicit logic that will impose, if not met by creative intelligence and corrective purpose, simplifying and reductive criteria of human need and human good ..." <sup>16</sup> To put it another way, also because if we are "blank about" this "intrinsic human nature, with [its] needs and latent potentialities," then we will be less likely to recognize such things as a state of alienation, <sup>17</sup> or as injustice.

I am thinking specifically here of some of the very old ethical teachings that *The Wire* may be said to rediscover or revitalize for us, teachings that reveal a side of human nature we might prefer to forget. Recall, for example, just how easy it is to find instances of ways in which *The Wire* brings home to us the continuing relevance of Christ's whited-sepulcher speech (Matthew 23:27) or of Shakespeare's *King Lear* on justice and authority:

**Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.  
(IV, vi, 166-69)**

In other words, respectability and legality, on the one side, and criminality, on the other, are no guarantee of where the good and bad (or the evil) are to be found. This isn't a new insight but *The Wire* revivifies it so that it becomes again a deeply troubling one. And even if there is always a risk of its resulting in cynicism, it still gives us, I would argue, an absolutely necessary perspective on things.

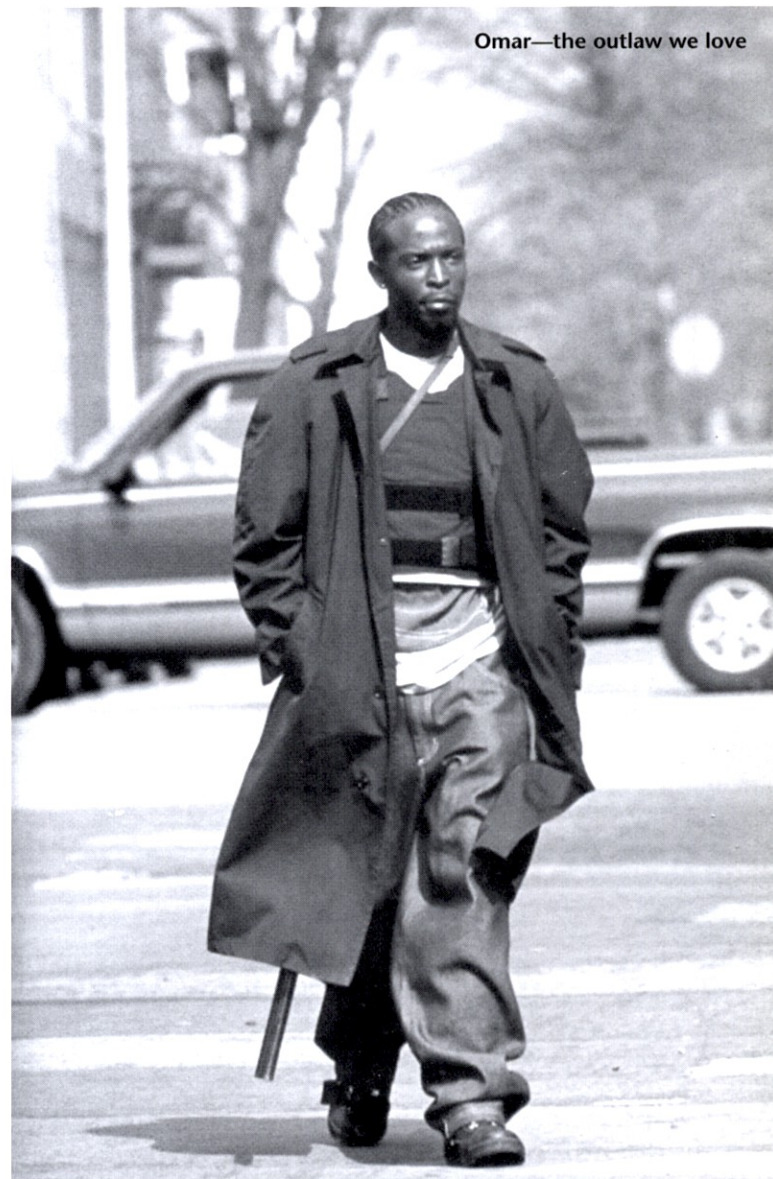
I will finish by making three separate points, the first of which I offer as a reflection on a claim Leavis once made to the effect that a "study of human nature is a study of social human nature." <sup>18</sup>

#### **(i) Institutions and independence**

If the characters in both *Middlemarch* and *The Wire* are caught up in vast webs, they are also (many but significantly not all of them) caught up in institutions or professions. And for the benefit of those who have not yet read George Eliot's great novel, I should explain that it resembles *The Wire* not only in its ethical concern but also insofar as it too is multi-layered and committed

to showing us the impact made by a number of institutions—the local gentry, the emerging middle-class, the medical profession, politics and journalism—on the life of one town, Middlemarch.

Let's look again at Lydgate who soon after his arrival in Middlemarch finds himself getting into problems with the doctors already there. He is, for example, soon approached by Mr Bulstrode, the town banker, who wants ("should a maturer knowledge favour that issue") to confide in him "the superintendence of [his] new hospital" (ch.13 129). There is a problem, however. Lydgate can only hope to secure that position if he is prepared to vote for Mr Tyke, Bulstrode's candidate for salaried chaplain to the hospital, and against the Reverend Camden Farebrother. This means that the problem can be formulated in terms of something that is perhaps the major, recurring headache for a number of the key characters in *The Wire*: the problem as to how to "keep yourself independent." And as Farebrother says, "Very few men can do that. Either you slip out of service altogether, and become good for nothing, or you wear the harness and draw a good deal where your yoke-fellows





pull you" (ch.17 184). At this early point in his career, Lydgate still has a lot to learn and it doesn't take too long before he finds himself wearing harness.

At the same time, Eliot also shows us that it is possible to encounter obstacles outside a profession (or institution) as well as inside one. Part of her point is how much greater an impact someone with Dorothea Brooke's abilities could have made if there had been socially-recognized channels for her to work in. In other words, while institutions can often be frustrating (and sometimes much worse than that), it is by no means obvious that we would be better off if we could somehow do without them. So there is real cause to be concerned when Simon tells us that it seemed to him and his principal collaborator "back in 2002, that there was something hollow and ugly at our institutional core, and from what Ed Burns understood of the Baltimore police department and school system, and from what I had witnessed at the heart of that city's newspaper, the institutional and systemic corruptions of our national life seemed near universal" ("Introduction" 5).

## (ii) The erotic

Yet even if it is true that there may be something in human nature that is likely to make life in institutions frequently difficult and sometimes unbearable, this is not to say that progress is impossible. For one of the ways in which *The Wire* can be said to demonstrate that some progress *has* taken place, all we need do is think of how it celebrates homosexuality—tenderly, erotically, beautifully and with so little fuss; both with Omar and his boyfriends and with Detective Shakima ("Kima") Greggs (Sonja Sohn) and her girlfriends—and also celebrates an inter-racial partnership with Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) and Rhonda Pearlman (Deidre Lovejoy)—again, tenderly, erotically etc..

## (iii) All complicit, all responsible (Eliot, Dostoevsky, Levinas)

**Sydnor:** I don't know man, I like street work more.

**Lester:** [in a tone of incredulity] You'd rather sit in a surveillance van days on end waiting to catch Tater handing Pee Wee a vial? *This*, detective, is what you're telling me? A case like this here [involving Senator Clay Davis], where you show who gets paid behind all the tragedy and fraud, where you show how the money routes itself, how we are all, *all* of us vested, all of us complicit... [Lester breaks off here, with the clear implication that such a case is his ideal]

**Sydnor [Corey Parker Robinson]:** Career case, huh?

**Lester:** [looking dreamily at the details of the case up on the bulletin board] Baby, I could die happy.  
(5.2.52)

It seems to me that in this exchange Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) effectively summarizes the way in which all the investigative work we see being carried out throughout all five seasons of *The Wire* has come into clearer focus in this particular case, a case that can (if we let it) bring home to us the nature of our own complicity. I think it is appropriate, therefore, to be reminded of the sentence in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* that the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas

made central to his own attempt at elaborating a form of ethics that could make sense after Auschwitz: "We are all responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others." And I will simply note here that, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> I think George Eliot (and Leavis too, incidentally) would have agreed with the first half of that sentence, if not necessarily with the second. I would have loved to know Robin Wood's thoughts on the subject.

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## Notes

- Wyatt Mason, "The HBO Auteur." *New York Times* March 17 2010.
- This is not to deny that fine and important essays on various aspects of *The Wire* have been written. See, for example, Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall eds., *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (New York: Continuum, 2009) and James S. Williams, "The Lost Boys of Baltimore: Beauty and Desire in the Hood," *Film Quarterly*, Winter 2008/2009. 62:2.
- Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, tr. Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2001. 42.
- See especially the marvelous (and classic) "Introduction (1988)" to *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- "An Interview with David Simon by Nick Hornby," in Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, New York, London etc.: Canongate, 2009. 386.
- It seems fitting, therefore, that they should conclude the "Author's Note" they placed at the end of *The Corner* by implicitly claiming kinship with the great James Agee.
- These are the episodes based on a "story" for which Simon is credited, sometimes along with someone else (most often Ed Burns). In addition to this, Simon is also credited with the "teleplay" for episodes 1-4, 6, 8, 10 and 13 in Season One; 1-3, 6, 9 and 12 Season Two; 1,9 and 12 Season Three; 1-2 and 13 Season Four; 1 and 12 Season Five.
- See "Rare Marker: An interview," by Samuel Douhaire and Annick Rivoire, in the booklet entitled *La Jetée/Sans Soleil* (p. 37) that can be found in the dvd version of these two films. The interview first appeared in *Libération* in 2003.
- Nor, incidentally, is it afraid to make this clear during the show itself. One thinks especially, for example, of D'Angelo's participation during the Second season in the in-prison reading group discussion of *The Great Gatsby* that is actually led by Richard Price in person (2.6.19) and of the Kafka citation that Walon, Bubs's sponsor in NA, hands to him in the series' final episode (Walon [who is played by the singer Steve Earle (Bubs, many viewers' favourite character, by Andre Royo)] is not a reader of Kafka himself but says he was given it by someone called Flubber "the night he had me start leading up the Saint Martin meeting"): You can hold back from the suffering of the world. You have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature. But perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided. (5.10.60)
- See, for example, the persistent hostility to ethics in the work of the formidable Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson.
- He says this in the "Ante Mortem" foreword he wrote for the 2006 edition of *Homicide*, xv.
- F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (1948). New York: New York UP, 1967. 2, 7-9.
- E.M. Forster, *Howard's End* (1910). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983. Ch. 5. 58.
- Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979. Ch.39. 337.
- George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-2). World's Classics. London: Oxford UP, 1961. Ch.15. 97.
- F.R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1972. 94.
- I recommend here Norman Geras's book on *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*. London: Verso, 1983.
- F.R. Leavis, "Anna Karenina: Thought and Significance in a Great Creative Work," in *"Anna Karenina" and Other Essays*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1967. 25. The full sentence reads: "A study of human nature is a study of social human nature, and the psychologist, sociologist, and social historian aren't in it compared with the great novelists."
- See Garry Watson, *Opening Doors: Thought From (And Of) The Outside*. Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 2008. 181-83.



# Remembering Arthur Penn (1922-2010)

by RICHARD LIPPE

Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968) is often credited with initiating the New American Cinema which arose from the ashes of the Hollywood studio system and classical filmmaking. The film remains a remarkable achievement as do a number of his films made between *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958) and *The Missouri Breaks* (1976). For nearly twenty years Penn was a highly original filmmaker who took a revisionist approach to the Hollywood genres to comment on contemporary American society and culture.

Penn became involved with theatre while serving in the army during WW II. In the early 50's he began working in New York City as a director of live television doing both comedy and dramatic material. *The Left-Handed Gun* was his first film and in the same year he began directing on Broadway. His

background in theatre and television was significant to his filmmaking technique. Doing live television, Penn learned to work with multiple cameras, a practice he continued as a filmmaker. He shot an extensive amount of footage and editing became a creative component of his work. Penn's admiration of the French New Wave filmmakers, particularly Godard and Truffaut, was another element that shaped his films. Like his experience in live television, the work of these filmmakers conveyed spontaneity and a willingness to experiment with the film medium.

As *Bonnie and Clyde* attests, Penn was willing to be audaciously innovative as a filmmaker and, as a social critic, equally bold.<sup>1</sup> The film, like most of Penn's work, is aligned to the 'outsider', people who reject (e.g., *Alice's Restaurant*) or who aren't capable of

fitting into mainstream society (e.g., *The Miracle Worker*). While Penn's films provide a bleak assessment of contemporary America, the films aren't anti-American. In fact, it is his commitment to America and its identity that contributes to the films' complexity and emotional force. If Penn can be aligned to a classical filmmaker, it is John Ford who, in addition to sharing Penn's ability to be a film poet, expressed a highly ambivalent attitude towards America, as he does in *The Searchers*, but never with cynicism. Penn's best work is humanistic and sincere but he is capable, as with *Bonnie and Clyde*, to brilliantly juxtapose violence, which he saw as being deeply ingrained in America's culture, and humour, using it as a means to challenge the viewer's preconceived expectations of what a well-made film should be like.

In *The Miracle Worker*, which is his most celebratory film of the power of imagination, love and the human spirit, Penn disregards the conventional attitude taken towards the biographical film to offer an intimate portrait of determination and survival instincts in

*The Miracle Worker*: Inga Swenson, Anne Bancroft, Arthur Penn





the context of almost insurmountable odds. It is also a film of great delicacy in illustrating the human need to belong, to be a part of a family or group—to find a place of acceptance and understanding.

Penn's films display an awareness of not only the dramatic potential of editing but also, the use of space and time — again *Bonnie and Clyde* is a good example. In addition Penn's work is geared to his actors and their ability to expressively communicate with the viewer. While his collaboration with male actors, Paul Newman, Warren Beatty, Marlon Brando, Gene Hackman is often acknowledged, it is also the case that his films contain major performances by actresses: Faye Dunaway, Estelle Parsons, Anne Bancroft, Patty Duke, Jane Fonda, Angie Dickinson, Pat Quinn. Several of his films have memorable endings that are centered on women; in *The Miracle Worker* it is a display of mutual love, but in *The Chase* and *Alice's Restaurant* Jane Fonda and Pat Quinn are respectively alone on screen, each lost with no place to go, survivors of the wreckage of a society that, because of its tensions and contradictions, implodes.

Penn's career effectively ends in the 70's which coincides with the social, culture and economic changes that lead to a shift in American politics that culminates with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan as president. In the Hollywood cinema, the era of Reaganite entertainment takes hold. Penn, as an artist, intellectual and social activist couldn't deal with 80's America and its post-modern culture. He was too honest of a person to participate in an industry that no longer was connected to a culture that valued wealth and success over integrity and human life.

#### Note

- 1 Wood, Robin, *Arthur Penn* (London: Studio Vista, 1967). Robin Wood's monograph is particularly insightful, because of his affinity with Penn's vision. Robin's commitment to Penn never wavered.

# Remembering Claude Chabrol (1930-2010)

## THE UNDERVALUED *BELLAMY*

by FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ and RICHARD LIPPE

From the beginning of his career in 1958 until 2009, Chabrol worked steadily, specializing in his detailed, nuanced, analyses of the bourgeoisie and a society that masks and denies its darker impulses under the guise of manners and civilized life. Chabrol stayed consistent with his thematic concerns and created a form uniquely his own through his blending of the contemporaneity of the New Wave/art film with the classical influences of directors like Hitchcock and Lang, which account for his predilection for the thriller. Like his colleagues of the New Wave, Chabrol was an educated artist, evidenced by his identity as a critic as well as a filmmaker. Chabrol remained closely identified with narrative film and popular entertainment which may account for his being underestimated as a ground breaking, highly original artist. In addition, his prolific output was uneven, but the amount of great films far exceeds the slighter efforts. Despite not being considered a modernist, politicized filmmaker like Godard or Rivette, Chabrol's films display a political awareness; for example, his work is remarkably astute in terms of his

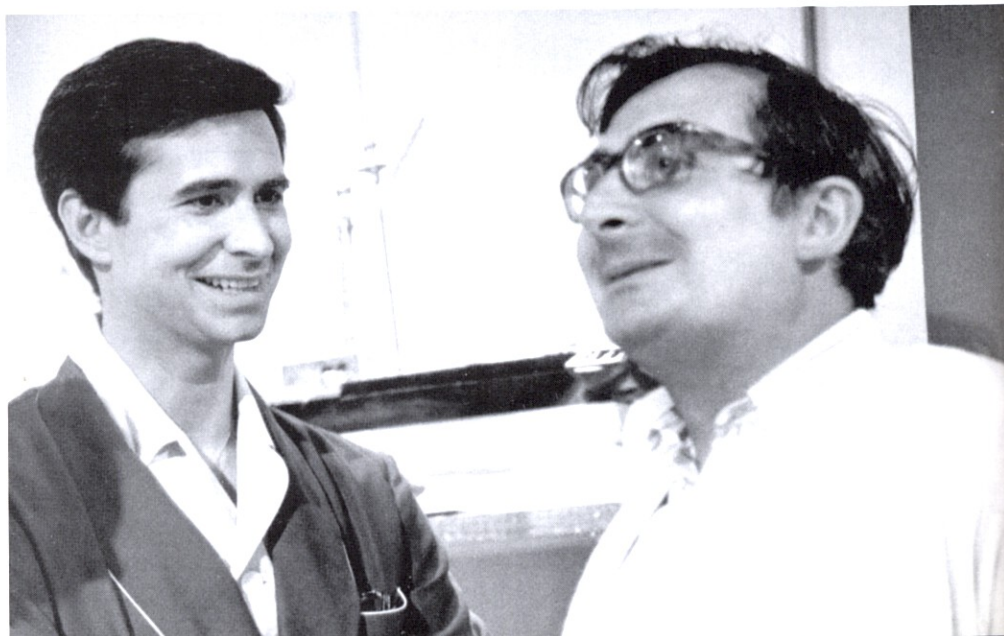
sensitivity to women. From the time of *Les Bonnes Femmes* (1959) through his collaborations with artists like Aurore Chabrol, Colo Tavernier, and actor/muses Stephane Audran and Isabelle Huppert, Chabrol's films often demonstrate an insightful critique of the woman's position and gender relations.

#### *Bellamy* (2009)

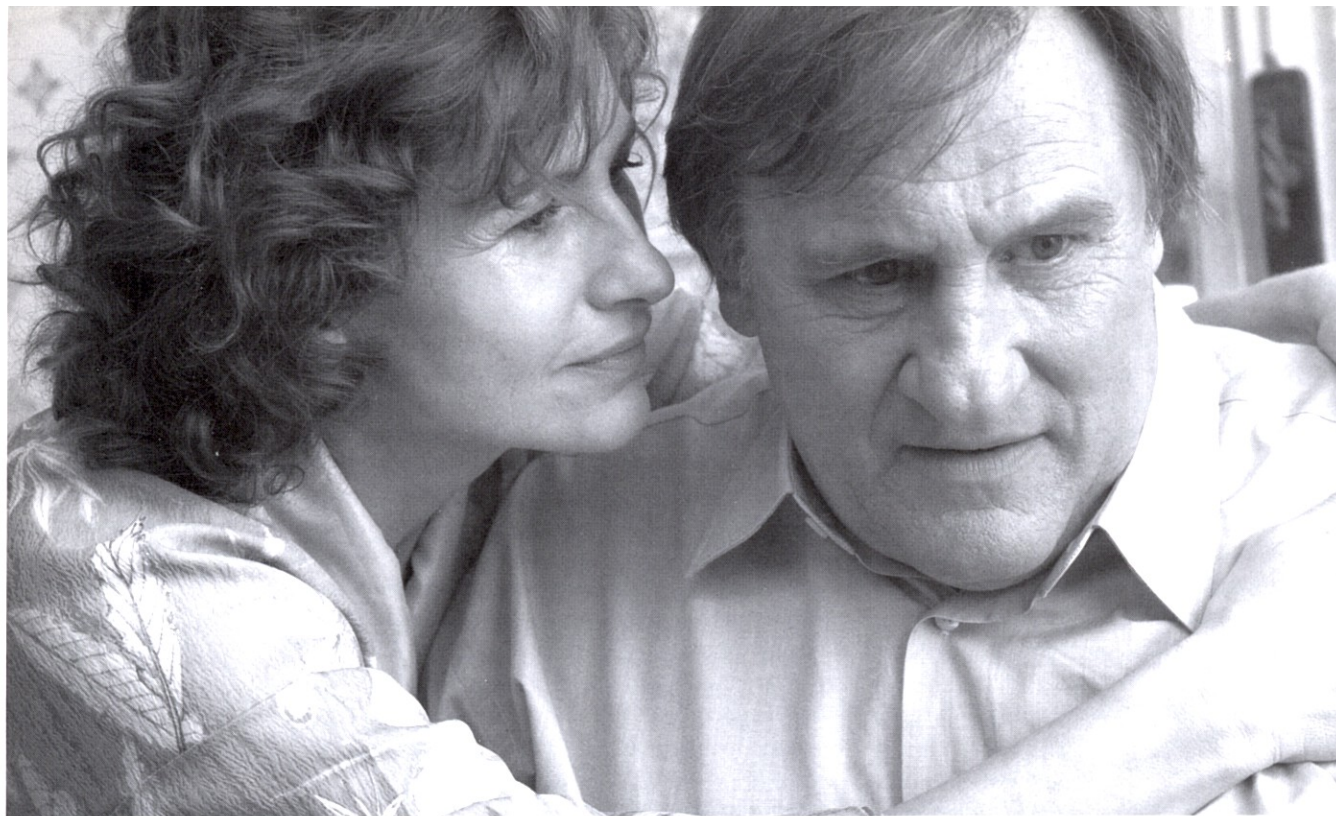
Chabrol's last film, *Bellamy* appears to be characteristic of what one expects of a mystery by Chabrol. It is, perhaps, a more personal work, offering, with Inspector Bellamy, a character suggestive of the director. *Bellamy* is firmly rooted in popular culture, dedicated to the music of Georges Brassens and the novels of Georges Simenon. It is a film that is witty and playful which may deceptively suggest a work that is casual and transparent; in fact, it should be considered one of Chabrol's major films.

The opening series of graceful tracking shots, punctuated by dissolves, give a view of graves in a well-groomed cemetery overlooking the sea; following a dissolve, the camera moves in a downward

*The Champagne Murders* (1967): Anthony Perkins, Claude Chabrol







*Bellamy*: Marie Bunel and Gérard Depardieu

direction over a cliff to reveal a wrecked car. There is then a cut to a close shot of a charred body and a severed head. The opening is both elegiac and oneiric, setting the tone for the film. *Bellamy* uses the style of narrative realism selectively, setting up an artificial world that invites identification with life and human experience, but in a controlled, highly stylized manner that is deftly handled by the director.

The iconic Gérard Depardieu is introduced as a celebrity police inspector who has recently published his memoirs and is vacationing in his wife's charming summer home. While busy with a crossword puzzle, pointedly stuck on the word 'happiness', a man/ Jacques Gamblin is introduced who has been spotted watching the house from the garden, and leaves his cellphone number for Inspector Bellamy with his wife Françoise/ Marie Bunel. Although she tries to discourage the man, she remembers the number and gives it to her husband who, intrigued, contacts him. Chabrol thus sets up the mystery but also the thematic the film pursues: the bourgeois is confronted by a double, a mirror who will act as a catalyst to expose the embedded tensions and problems of the protagonist. The problem of happiness is explored through the stranger who may or may not have

caused a man to die, yet as the narrative develops, the focus of the mystery is reflected in Bellamy's personal life—his troubled relationship with his brother and his insecurities regarding his wife's fidelity. Although the brother is introduced as the hard luck antithesis of Bellamy's success, the film implicates Bellamy, subtly and then more insistently, as a major factor in his step-brother's demise. The film comes full circle by the time the trial of the accused man is over and he is acquitted. Bellamy is instrumental in securing this acquittal, despite his doubts as to whether he was exploited or conned in helping the insurance man get away with murder. By the end of the film, another man is dead in a car accident. In a shot reminiscent of the film's opening, the camera tracks in towards a car wreck and then moves over towards the sea, and one is left to ponder Bellamy's responsibility in the death of his step-brother.

In *Bellamy*, Chabrol's concerns are consistent with his critique of middle-class values and the accoutrements of success and happiness. The professional/celebrity inspector and his false sense of security and well-being are undermined by the pettiness, jealousies and the desire to dominate that underpins them. The film exposes the drives

for comfort and pleasure and status that are attained at the cost of the more vulnerable.

Despite the film's critique of a social class, the Inspector and his wife are likable characters; they have an affectionate, demonstrative relationship and connect intimately with each other. The film, however, sharply delineates Bellamy's limitations—be it with regard to his uncertainties regarding his wife's faithfulness or his discomfort with getting too friendly with the local gay couple. Most disturbing are the relentless put-downs volleyed at his step-brother, which belie his guarded hospitality towards him.

As a final film, *Bellamy* is a testament to Chabrol's career—it is neither a heavy-handed film about accomplishment and mortality nor a light entertainment about the foibles of the Inspector. The complex of family relationships is one's entry point to the narrative. *Bellamy* insists that familial relations are motivated by primal feelings of love, hate and rage that never go away and threaten to reemerge despite one's best abilities to ignore them, often remaining, ultimately irresolvable. It is an unsettling and disturbing film, engaging the viewer to address the complacency that protects one from probing too far.



# Britton on Film

THE COMPLETE FILM CRITICISM OF ANDREW BRITTON

by JAMES MacDOWELL

Andrew Britton, *Britton on Film: the Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009.

Although Andrew Britton studied under Robin Wood at the University of Warwick in the 1970s, Wood would repeatedly speak of their roles of teacher and pupil having become reversed. In the introduction to *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, Wood suggests that Britton's "miscellaneous writings, critical and theoretical, scattered among various and often obscure periodicals, would, collected, amount to a book of incomparable distinction"<sup>1</sup>. Going further in the introduction to *Britton on Film*, he asserts, "it is more important to read this book than to read my own collected writings" (p. xiii). As the review below will argue, we can surely agree with the first statement; but I find it necessary to balk at the second.

Robin Wood was one of the main causes of my learning to love writing about the cinema. The first piece of his that I clearly remember encountering was the article 'Rethinking Romantic Love: *Before Sunrise*'<sup>2</sup>. It was with a beautiful, sharp shock that I read its first words: "I knew, the first time

*Now, Voyager* (1942): Paul Henried and Bette Davis





I saw *Before Sunrise*, that here was a film for which I felt not only interest or admiration, but love." Immediately, it was clear that this writer was determined to be open about something that was being problematically repressed in so much other scholarship: the absolutely crucial, unavoidable, importance of a critic's own emotions in guiding and shaping judgments. Never before had I been moved by film criticism. Yet Wood's sometimes startling honesty was not only valuable for the way it invited readers into what felt an intimate conversation with him; it was also fundamental to his critical philosophy. The last words of his *Before Sunrise* piece refer to a line from the film which speaks of the "magic" involved in "the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something". "The same might be said," Wood suggests, "of the critic's relationship to the films s/he loves." The personal nature of his writing here, and elsewhere, was not only a matter of frankness, but also a necessary response to the themes of a film, to the relationship between critics and films in general, and to the irreducibly social relationship between critic and reader, wherein two minds "attempt to understand someone, share something".

Wood has called Britton "a finer mind than my own" (p. xv). It is true that Britton possessed a towering intellect that was quite possibly more rigorous than his mentor's, and that he demonstrated a grasp of theory to which Wood readily admitted he was largely immune. Yet my relationship with Andrew Britton's body of work is one of utmost admiration; my relationship with Robin Wood's is also one of love. What follows can be understood as my tribute to them both.

#### Review:

Andrew Britton believed in setting out his stall. A merciless critic of hypocrisy and evasiveness in others, in his own work he sought always to declare his attitudes and assumptions as explicitly as possible, often opening articles with declarations of principle that served as landmarks for the field upon which battle was soon to commence. As he writes in 'The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and the "Classical Style"', "If readers do not know where the critic stands in relation to the work, they have no means of defining or assessing the critic's judgments" (p. 125). In tribute to such candor, let us begin this review with the conclusion I hope will be reached by anyone upon closing this book: the marginalization of the work of Andrew Britton by the field of film studies must be regarded as nothing short of a scandal. This review will in large part attempt to argue why I consider such a conclusion unavoidable.

In his tragically foreshortened career as a critic Britton produced a body of articles which, even if judged on subject matter alone, one might imagine would since have become obligatory reading for film studies students the world over. At the very least, a number of his coruscating attacks on reigning orthodoxies of 70s, 80s, and 90s film theory (e.g.: 'Screen theory', neoformalism, postmodernism, theories of the Culture Industry) deserve to have achieved classic status on modules teaching the historical development of the discipline. A conceivable reason for their current obscurity could be that much of his writing originally appeared in publications (predominantly *Movie*, *Framework*, and *CineAction*) less concerned with following academic fashion than





some of their peers, which were therefore sidelined from the mainstream of film studies discourse. Their institutional position may have caused Britton's pieces to simply go unread by those they targeted, thus meaning a lack of responses, and consequently the articles' relegation from the debates into which they promised to be such forceful interventions. As Robin Wood suggests in the introduction to this book, however, another possible explanation for Britton's sidelining is that his most explosive critiques did not in fact pass unnoticed so much as they were strategically ignored in the interests of avoiding critical dialogues from which the subjects of his attacks were unlikely to emerge unscathed (p. xiii). Of course, we can never ultimately know which of these explanations comes closest to the truth. One thing we may confidently say, however, is that it seems unlikely that a member of the editorial board of *Screen* could have read 'The Ideology of *Screen*' in 1979 and deemed it merely unworthy of comment; likewise for David Bordwell and 'The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole' in 1988, and for many other of Britton's targets.

On a perhaps more frivolous note, another quality of Britton's work that makes his undeserved obscurity so surprising is its eminent quotability. How exactly is it that lines such as "the discourse of postmodernism as a whole reminds one of nothing so much as a game of Trivial Pursuit for highbrows" (p. 483), or "as a philosophical orientation, structuralism might be described as Marxism for queasy stomachs" (p. 395) could have failed to become well-worn epigrams? Retorts like these demonstrate Britton's sometimes devastating rhetorical wit, but are also employed in the service of arguments whose depth and rigor have guaranteed such quips never feel simply flip (Britton was nothing if not immensely serious), but rather emerge as penetrating, and witty, condensations of significant criticisms. The liveliness, elegance, and economy of Britton's prose, however, are nevertheless certainly key pleasures of this collection, and constitute further arguments for his work's reappraisal. Take, for instance, his description of David Bordwell's attempts in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* to dismiss the 'non-classical' elements of *film noir* in order to defend his central thesis of studio-era Hollywood's "group style":

Consider the bloody snuffing out of *film noir*—an antagonist whose many obnoxious features, grimly enumerated by Mr. Bordwell between clenched teeth [...], foredoomed it, sooner or later, to his undying enmity: it is, indeed, the epitome of everything that a classical film cannot conceivably be. Mr. Bordwell appraises the loathsome heretical object with icy contempt for some moments, pondering the most efficient method of attack, and then opts boldly for a vicious surprise-assault on its exposed ontologicals: speaking *ex-cathedra*, he issues a Declaration of Total Oblivion whereby the object shall be deemed henceforth to have no finite existence. (p. 447) <sup>3</sup>

Quite apart from how delicious it is to read 'academic' writing this stylish and dynamic, the language here also serves an important descriptive function: through its emotional intensification it concisely lays bare the problematic theoretical and evaluative maneuvers underlying the "impartial discourse" (p.

425) Bordwell's rhetoric pretends to. Of course, Britton goes on to enumerate what he sees as Bordwell's critical failings in much greater detail, but it is a tribute to the holistic nature of his writing that such flourishes are seldom employed for their own sake, but rather embody within their very form the content they seek to express.

While style is certainly a too-often undervalued aspect of the critical act, however, Britton's work is finally less important for its achievements in rhetoric than for its ideas and, perhaps above all, its approach. *Britton on Film* is divided into four parts: 'Hollywood Cinema', 'Hollywood Movies', 'European Cinema', and 'Film and Cultural Theory'. Although this division is certainly welcome for the sake of clarity of reading, it is true enough to say that whatever films Britton wrote on, he was always also implicitly struggling with one question in particular: how most responsibly to carry out film criticism. To grasp his proposed answers to this question is to grasp what is most important and urgent in this collection.

Britton rejected outright "the myth of academic impartiality" (p. 464), instead responding to film in a way that was unavoidably personal, yet always written in the knowledge that the 'personal' reaction is never merely a rarefied expression of individual opinion, but the result of an encounter at a particular historical, cultural, and ideological moment. This fact necessarily led him to conclude that "the critical enterprise... is intrinsically—and should be frankly—political" (p. 426). For Britton, an awareness of the inherently political nature of criticism inspired two of his most deeply held, and most frequently reiterated, beliefs: (1) that any act of criticism is also always (regardless of frequent protestations to the contrary) an act of evaluation, and thus (2) that critical writing demands an informed knowledge of, and attitude towards, both the material historical processes informing artworks and the historical moment in which the act of criticism itself takes place. As he writes in 'In Defense of Criticism':

Criticism is the systematic reading (that is, evaluation) of texts. Like all other activities, it takes place in the present. Like all other critical activities, it presupposes a principled attitude to the politics which constitute the present. The business of the film critic is to arrive at an understanding, on the basis of that attitude—which ought to be as alert and as conscious as possible—of what is of value in the past and present of the cinema, and to ensure that this value is recognized for what it is, and has the influence it ought to have, now. (p. 376)

Britton's desire to determine what such influence could, or should, be pulses through every article in this book, and is linked always to a scrupulously materialist conception of history. Driven by the simple, yet absolutely fundamental, conviction that "all works of art represent an intervention in a culture and... interpretation is a process of defining what the nature of that intervention is" (p. 426), his analyses of films are always also implicitly responses to "the historical situation in which genre, artist, and audience intersect with each other" (p. 29). The combination of the personal and the political in Britton's writing lent his works an infectious passion and a rare human-



ity: a sentence such as “I wish to discuss *Now, Voyager* (1942) not only because I love it, but also because it seems to me to raise a number of important critical issues in a particularly suggestive form,” (p. 24) catches well a sense of balance maintained throughout his work.

Of course, Britton was, like his mentors Eric Mottram and Robin Wood, indebted to the literary criticism of F. R. Leavis—a figure consistently vilified in the early years of film studies for a liberal humanism deemed antithetical to the ‘science’ promised by the numerous theoretical approaches informed by Saussurean linguistics. Britton’s dedication to a criticism that was Marxist, yet nevertheless grounded more in Leavis than Saussure, served as a methodological line in the sand throughout his career. He inherited from Leavis, among other things, an essential humanism, a belief in the value of bourgeois artforms, a tendency to evaluate works in relation to their moral vision, and a commitment to close textual analysis (on which more shortly). Yet it should be said that Britton was by no means an uncritical ‘Leavisite’. Quite apart from the fact that he saw criticism in a far more political and historical light than Leavis ever did (and that his love for popular culture clearly distinguished him further), he could also be explicitly hostile to his predecessor’s work: see, for example, his flat repudiation of the central thesis of *The Great Tradition* in ‘The Politics of Difference, or: How to Create a Socialist-Feminist Culture in one Capitalist Country Without Really Trying’ (one of the pieces unfortunately absent from this collection)<sup>4</sup>. While wary of the potential for essentialism in his methods, however, Britton in fact considered Leavis to have more radical potential than many of the structuralist-influenced theorists who decried his conservatism throughout the height of ‘Screen theory’. Objecting to what he saw as the persistent misrepresentation of Leavis as advocating

an unchanging “system for providing values”, Britton writes,

Leavis’ epistemology tends to suggest that “values” and “knowledge” are inseparably in process in language and that that process is at work in and on “a public world”. The world comes to be present only through the process, and—one might go on to say—it is only through the process that the articulation of change becomes possible. (p. 392)

This possibility for “the articulation of change” allowed by Leavis is what sets him apart from many of the critics and theorists with whom Britton so frequently clashed throughout his career. For Britton, it was not Leavis but the collected acolytes of Adorno, Saussure, Althusser, Lacan, Barthes and Derrida whom he saw as adhering to various incarnations of an overarching and dangerous “idealist fallacy” (p. 392).

One trait shared by ‘Screen theory’, postmodernism, and theories of the Culture Industry that consistently raised Britton’s ire was their use of the language and rhetoric of radicalism to “give a spurious political gloss to discourses which are in fact innocent of all politics” (p. 374). As he put it, in a line that could act as a rallying cry for committed socialist critics everywhere: “Marxism is politics—not just another academic hermeneutic” (p. 374). For theories to be “innocent of all politics” for Britton meant that they could have no conceivable practical political purpose; that is: they displayed a “complete inability to propose an intelligible strategy of cultural/political resistance to the social conditions they describe” (p. 485). In keeping with his Marxist principles, Britton was unwaveringly dedicated to a view of history, culture, and man that allowed for the possibility of revolutionary change. As such—in an

*The Reckless Moment* (1949): Shepperd Strudwick and Joan Bennett





anticipation of accusations brought against 'apparatus theory' by audience researchers—a common cause for Britton to accuse critics of disingenuous radicalism was an adherence to theoretical frameworks that he considered to deny the potential for agency. It is this position that caused him to stringently oppose the remarkably numerous theories adopted by film studies that implicitly treated human subjects as so 'interpellated' as to be helpless, or which saw the various structures of contemporary capitalist society as so powerful as to be essentially unalterable.

For Britton, many idols of the different strands of mainstream film theory in the 70s, 80s and 90s, despite their differences, all ultimately displayed a deplorable "commitment to a model of the world in which the common people cannot but help appear as the drugged and stupid victims of a successful confidence trick" (p. 491), thus finally making them incapable of resistance. The overriding objection Britton made to such theory was its ahistorical, and tiresomely recurrent, assumption that "the mode determines the work determines the reader" (p. 417). That is to say: the 'bad object' in culture—be it embodied in Barthes' 'readerly text', MacCabe's 'classic realist text', Adorno's 'culture industry', Althusser's 'institutional state apparatus', or indeed Lacan's 'mirror stage'—indoctrinates so fully those who experience it that any attempts at escape or resistance become futile. As Britton rightly says, this philosophical position on art, "in accounting for everything but itself... accounts for nothing at all: its existence is the tacit contradiction of its contents" (p. 492). He goes on, "if Adorno and Althusser have contrived to escape, why should not another?" (p. 492). Britton's point is that any theory relying on the assumption that cultural products, capitalist society (or, even worse, *human consciousness*) deny the possibility for critique or opposition is destined to be immediately invalidated by the very existence of the theory itself. Followed to their conclusion, such assumptions mean that, "we cease to be able to account for structured conscious discourse—e.g.: a poem, or our own argument—or we assume that the structure is unconsciously motivated" (p. 396). The only possible explanation, then, for the *theorist's* ability to stand outside such an ideological hall of mirrors is that, "covertly, we assume the immunity of our own self-consciousness, guaranteed by our access to science" (p. 396). Britton recognized that such arguments were based on an essential fiction—and not even a useful fiction, given the political and intellectual inertia it encouraged.

Clearly, for a book (or book review) to raise these debates today is to relate itself to a relatively distant context. Yet, as Britton might well say, the continual reassessment of the past is an invaluable part of the process of responsible film criticism. In the same way as what is of value in the cinematic past should be made to have "the influence it ought to have, now," so should critical discourse receive the same treatment. One reason for revisiting this fraught period of film studies' history, then, is to acknowledge the extent to which Britton was significantly ahead of his time in pointing out the flaws of such theories, as well as the fact that many of his objections anticipated those that would eventually bring about the near total abandonment of the various strands of 'Screen theory' during the 80s and 90s. Another motivation, however, is to bring attention to the proposed alternatives he called for, which were—and still are—appreciably different to anything in the

mainstream of the discipline.

While many of the approaches to film history and cognitivism that followed the fall of 'Grand Theory' proposed a 'middle-level research' severed from radical politics<sup>5</sup>, and much study of spectatorship proceeded from the assumption that "apparatus theories are not completely wrong, but rather incomplete"<sup>6</sup>, Britton instead advocated a criticism committed both to Marxist-feminist theory and to close textual analysis. In doing so, he gave the lie to an accusation that was, and sometimes still is<sup>7</sup>, repeatedly leveled at those critics influenced by Leavis, and latterly by what we might loosely call the 'Movie tradition': namely, that they were apolitical. Leaving aside the fact that this claim clearly requires an absurdly narrow interpretation of what it means to be 'political', it is also blind to the many pieces *Movie* published from the 1970s onwards which were explicitly concerned with matters of ideology—and, indeed, to the fact that the tradition could indirectly give birth to a journal such as this one, founded as it was upon the dual principles of close reading and radical critique. If there are still those who hold this misguided belief, however, one further argument for the contemporary significance of *Britton on Film* is that it has the ability to put paid to such allegations once and for all. As Britton puts it, in a characteristic moment of pointed parody and understatement: "I would certainly be unwilling to assume in advance that an interest in discriminating between one artifact and another is in itself incompatible with a radical position" (p. 495).

Indeed, it was Britton's view that responsible political criticism can *only* be carried out in conjunction with close attention to the material realization of artworks; as he says: "no film theory is worth anything which does not stay close to the concrete and which does not strive continually to check its own assumptions and procedures in relation to producible texts" (p. 373). There are a number of reasons for agreeing with Britton on this point. Firstly, a criticism grounded in close analysis encourages a nuanced and detailed assessment of a film's politics that stands in sharp contrast to approaches relying on "the subordination of interpretation to judgments of value, derived from *idées reçues*, which precede the act of analysis" (p. 426). It therefore also allows us both to move beyond any assumptions that "the mode determines the work determines the reader", and forces us to question similar, more localized, assumptions about the ideological meanings of particular conventions. Take, for example, studio-era Hollywood. Britton saw classical Hollywood conventions as having been "arrived at through the yoking by violence together of the most contradictory and heterogeneous formal and ideological materials," a genesis guaranteeing that "the resulting admixture is both exceptionally elegant and coherent *and* potentially explosive" (p. 456). As such, we should see no Hollywood convention as *inherently* ideologically conservative, just as we should view no convention as being *inherently* progressive, since a film's politics can "be gauged not by the fact that it uses certain conventions but *by its use of them*" (p. 417). When applied with intellectual rigor (and with sensitivity to artworks' historical specificity), a focus on realized meaning allows us to see through assertions such as Bordwell's in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* that the "goal-oriented protagonist" of Hollywood cinema is "a reflection of an ideology of American individualism and enterprise," and that



Hollywood narrative constitutes the "[translation of] this ideology into a rigorous chain of cause and effect"<sup>8</sup>. As Britton says in response to these claims:

**Mr. Bordwell strategically ignores the possibility that a protagonist may have goals that are sanctioned by the culture but the pursuit and consummation of which turn out to be in, in practice, disastrous; or again, the protagonist might have difficulty in achieving the goal or in formulating any constructive goals at all, because, for example, she is a woman, and her powers of practical agency are very severely circumscribed.** (p. 436)

The point is, of course, that one can only hope to discern which texts express these meanings through an analysis of the texts themselves. This therefore means that such analysis should always precede any attempt to read groups of individual films as conveying similar ideological meanings. Britton himself was by no means averse to grouping films under similar ideological banners—as seen, for example, in his work on 1970s horror cinema, 'Reaganite entertainment', comedies of the 'democratic couple', or the 'Freudian-feminist melodrama'<sup>9</sup>. The difference between his approach to groupings and many others', however, is that it was always grounded firmly in the dual evidence of films' textual detail and their particular historical contexts—a fact making his claims for the groupings persuasive, and the political significance of their similarities unmistakable.

This being not merely an article about the work of Andrew Britton but also a review of the book *Britton on Film*, it would be remiss to pass over the significant number of improvements that could be made to a volume whose subtitle, *The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, proves somewhat misleading. I am fortunate, however, in that a number of reviewers have already ably enumerated instances of Barry Keith Grant's occasionally troubling editing. Brad Stevens' *Sight and Sound* review rightly notes the omission of Britton's article on documentary, 'The Invisible Eye'<sup>10</sup>, as well as the fact that 'A New Servitude' still contains errors that Britton himself corrected in a letter to *CineAction*<sup>11</sup>. Writing for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Alexander Jacoby expresses surprise at the exclusion of a piece on *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947) written for *The Movie Book of Film Noir*<sup>12</sup>. James Zborowski comments in his review for *Screen* that only one *Reckless Moment* (1949) article Britton co-authored with the editorial board of *Framework* is included, and that Grant has printed a significantly shorter version of the article on *Pursued* (from *The Movie Book of the Western*) in place of 'Pursued: A Reply to Paul Willemsen', which appeared in *Framework* many years earlier<sup>13</sup>. Tony Williams also carries out an extremely thorough cataloguing of the collection's errors in his review for *November 3rd Club* (freely accessible online), drawing attention to everything from the absence of Britton's response to a review of Richard Dyer's *Gays on Film* in *Screen Education*, to the misspelling of Timpanaro in the bibliography<sup>14</sup>.

Yet it should go without saying that these minor disappointments recede into insignificance when weighed against the service Grant has done us by overseeing the collection and republishing of the majority of Britton's work in the first place.

The value of this undertaking should not be underestimated. It is unusual for a university press to publish a large collection of this kind, dedicated as it is to a single author of film criticism—in particular one whose contribution to the field is yet to be suitably recognized—and we owe the editor a debt of gratitude for convincing Wayne State to do so in this case. While for those already familiar with Britton's work the existence of this book seems an absolute necessity (and in fact long overdue), I can well imagine it did not always seem so to everyone Grant approached with the project. It is therefore a tribute to his judgment and dedication that he has managed to successfully bring this campaign to fruition.

The significance of the appearance of *Britton on Film* today lies in its potential to revive interest in a singular critic whose work has much to teach students of cinema. For eighteen years, Britton consistently demonstrated that there was another way to practise film criticism: neither journalistic nor stereotypically academic, neither auteurist nor blind to great artistry, fluent in both theory and close analysis, champion and critic of popular culture, deeply political and deeply humanist. Whether or not there is space for such a criticism today remains to be seen, but the contents of this book function as a powerful argument for its enduring relevance and desirability.

**James MacDowell** has recently completed his doctoral thesis on the Hollywood 'happy ending' at the University of Warwick. He is an editorial board member of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*.

## Notes

- 1 Robin Wood. *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), v.
- 2 Robin Wood. 'Rethinking Romantic Love: Before Sunrise', *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 318–335.
- 3 For the sake of capturing its full effect I am quoting this text as originally published rather than as it is reproduced in *Britton on Film*, where editor Barry Keith Grant has changed all references made to 'Mr. Bordwell' instead simply to 'Bordwell'. Given the damage it does to Britton's style, this is one of Grant's less forgivable editorial decisions. I catalogue a number of others towards the end of this review.
- 4 Andrew Britton, 'The Politics of Difference, or: How to Create a Socialist-Feminist Culture in one Capitalist Country Without Really Trying', *CineAction!*, no. 17 (1989), pp. 3–15. Again, please refer to the end of the review for a list of further omissions.
- 5 David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, ed. *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 26
- 6 Judith Mayne, 'Paradoxes of Spectatorship', *The Film Cultures Reader*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 2002), 30
- 7 See: Peter Harcourt, 'The Movie Tradition', *Scope* (2001): [www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/confreport.php?issue=nov2001&id=954&section=conf\\_rep](http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/confreport.php?issue=nov2001&id=954&section=conf_rep).
- 8 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristen Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 16
- 9 See: 'The Devil, Probably: The Symbolism of Evil' (p. 64–73), 'Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment' (p. 97–145), 'Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire' (p. 3–23), and 'A New Servitude: Bette Davis, *Now Voyager*, and the Radicalism of the Woman's film' (p. 24–63) respectively.
- 10 Andrew Britton, 'Invisible Eye', *Sight and Sound*, March 1992: 26–29
- 11 Brad Stevens, Review, *Sight and Sound*, April 2009: 93. The letter containing the correction appears in *CineAction* 29, (1992): 104.
- 12 Alexander Jacoby, Review, *Times Literary Supplement*, October 16, 2009: 17–18
- 13 James Zborowski, Review, *Screen* 50:4 (2009): 450–53
- 14 Tony Williams, Review, *The November Club*, Fall 2009 (Online): [www.wetdryvac.net/November3rdClub/2009/09-2009/nonfic-](http://www.wetdryvac.net/November3rdClub/2009/09-2009/nonfic-)



# Kim Novak FIVE FILMS

by RICHARD LIPPE

As a longstanding reader of *CineAction* knows, I am a great admirer of Kim Novak, her talent and beauty. Although Robin didn't share my degree of enthusiasm, he was also an admirer of hers, not only because of *Vertigo* but for her performances in *Bell, Book and Candle*, *Strangers When We Meet* and *Of Human Bondage*. I dedicate this review to Robin who, I think, would like that.

**THE KIM NOVAK COLLECTION:  
DVD, 3-DISC SET COLUMBIA PICTURES; SONY PICTURES**

The recent DVD release of 'The Kim Novak Collection' gives Kim Novak recognition as a major actress of the late classical Hollywood cinema. Novak had been long under appreciated for her talent and as having an individual on screen presence and persona. It wasn't until the 1996 theatrical restoration of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) that she began getting the critical attention she deserved. The collection is also significant in that it contains two films, *Jeanne Eagels* (1957) and *Middle of the Night* (1959), that haven't had any previous non-theatrical distribution. Both films were commercially unsuccessful and generally considered by the critics at the time of their release as failed attempts to prove that Novak could act.

The collection, which includes *Picnic* (1955), *Pal Joey* (1957) and *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958), provides a snapshot of Novak's years at Columbia Pictures, the studio she was under contract to from 1954 to 1962. As Novak had no acting experience prior to signing with the studio, her future in films had a lot to do with how Harry Cohn, Columbia's president and head of production, handled her career. Cohn, in 1953, was seeking a replacement for Rita Hayworth, who became the studio's major female star in the 40's; Novak's potential as an actress was less relevant to the studio's needs. He wanted a young sexy blonde woman who would be his alternative to Marilyn Monroe, who under contract to Twentieth Century Fox, had caused a sensation through her physical presence and liberated attitude towards her body and sexuality. Cohn's primary concern was to create a star which, he claimed, he could do. His reasons for choosing Novak may have been the combination of a strong screen presence, good looks and the right physical assets. The studio launched a media campaign to introduce

Novak's visual presence to the public before she appeared in a film. But Cohn didn't succeed in making her a rival to Monroe as a sex symbol; Novak, on screen, displayed a range of characteristics that gave her a complex persona entirely of her own.

Novak's screen debut in *Pushover* (1954), a film noir starring Fred MacMurray, in which she plays the female lead, was followed by the Judy Holliday comedy *Phffft!* (1954) in which she has a supporting role as the 'dumb blonde' and is encouraged to imitate an early 50's Monroe. While Novak is used as a sexual presence in both films, she functions much better in *Pushover*, projecting a vulnerability that undermines the femme fatale aspects of the role. Novak's initial films generated positive fan mail and encouraged Cohn. His decision to cast her in *Picnic* (1955) soon after the making of *The Eddy Duchin Story* (1956) which was shot after the caper film *Five Against the House* (1955) indicated that he felt that she could act. *Picnic* was an expensive and acclaimed theatrical property in which Novak was given the female lead role. The renowned Joshua Logan, who directed the play on stage, was brought to Hollywood to direct the film version. Logan didn't want her in the film and made it clear to both Cohn and Novak but, despite his antagonism, she gives a touching performance. In fact, of the principal lead actors, Novak provides the film with its most authentic characterization. *Picnic* showcased her beauty and sensual physicality but it also illustrated her ability to express the character's alienation and despair over being referred to as 'the pretty one' and whose future welfare depends upon marrying well. The film, which was released late in 1955, turned her into a star, but the critics were hesitant to acknowledge her talent, pointing out that she was a product of the studio system. Novak, at the same time, appeared in Otto Preminger's *The Man With the Golden Arm* co-starring with Frank Sinatra (1955). In the film, she was again a striking physical presence and brought depth of feeling to a role that, with a less sensitive actress, could have been cliché. Preminger's film displayed, as did *Picnic*, her innate reserve and vulnerability but it also gave Novak a more self-assured character to play. It also reinforced Novak's on screen persona as being that of an 'outsider', someone who isn't comfortable with the status quo. Novak's resistance or implicit rebellion is what gives her a distinctive identity and it is at odds with the concept of her as a sex symbol.





*Jeanne Eagels: Sal and Jeanne have different priorities*

While under contract to Columbia, Novak was loaned out twice, to Preminger in 1955 and in 1957 to Hitchcock for *Vertigo*. These two films were important to her career, with the latter, an extraordinary film, giving her one of the great female lead roles of the cinema. Novak was an ideal choice to play the dual role of Madeleine/Judy as her presence and persona embody the conflict between being perceived as an idealized figure of desire and wanting to be recognized as a person with an identity of her own. In *Vertigo*, the tension Novak projects on screen was given its most eloquent realization and expression.

Cohn had the reputation of being a crude, tough, and shrewd businessman. He knew how to treat a worthwhile investment. Novak, at Columbia, was surrounded by creative artists on and off screen, the latter including cameraman James Wong Howe (*Picnic*, *Bell, Book and Candle*), Jean Louis (costume designer), Robert Colburn (still photographer). While Cohn kept a tight reign on her career, he was willing to allow Novak an opportunity to partake in its development. It was Novak's idea to do *Middle of the Night*, a project Cohn felt wouldn't further her career. That he allowed Novak to do the film, suggests that Cohn was confident in her future as a star and actress whatever the commercial and/or critical reaction to the film. Novak acknowledges that after Cohn's death in 1958, the projects she was offered at Columbia were mediocre.<sup>1</sup>

As a tribute to Novak, the inclusion of *Picnic*, long in distribution, is essential to the box set. More questionable is the choice of *Pal Joey*, also long in distribution, which receives a disc

of its own (unlike the other four films which are on two discs), and is billed as a new transfer from the original negative. If *Pal Joey* deserves highlighting, it isn't because the film is one of Novak's more significant works. It is, in fact, a film that is marginal to her career. Yet it's *Pal Joey*, (the portrait photograph used on the box set cover was taken as publicity for the film), that is often considered one of her iconic works. In *Pal Joey*, she is both the-girl-next-door and, with the strip tease number she performs as a showgirl, a woman comfortable with her sexuality. Of much more relevance to Novak's career is *Bell, Book and Candle*; in it her screen presence and persona are used in a way that highlights her complexity and individuality.

In the section below, I am commenting briefly on concerns that are relevant to Novak's participation in each of the films in the collection.

#### ***Picnic***

The highlight of *Picnic* is the 'Moonglow' sequence. It is partly so because of the imaginative staging and lighting of the sequence but, also, because of the sexual energy generated by Novak's Madge and William Holden's Hal as they publicly acknowledge their physical attraction to each other. It's the moment when she acts on *her* desire and spontaneously initiates the sensual dance they perform. The dance begins as a mating ritual but, as the music shifts into a romantic mode, it gives way to an expression of the mutual empathy and tenderness they feel towards each other. With the dance, Madge



moves from a passive presence to that of an active participant in the shaping of her life. Soon after, she takes another step in this direction as she goes to comfort Hal after he's been denounced as a troublemaker by Rosemary (Rosalind Russell) and Alan (Cliff Robertson).

Novak's graceful depiction of Madge's transition from adolescence into adulthood begins in the preceding sequence that introduces the evening's Labour Day festivities with Madge being crowned its queen. In this sequence, as in the one mentioned above, she conveys the character's feelings with minimal dialogue. Novak relies on her presence, gestures and behaviour.

*Picnic* provided an ideal opportunity for Novak to utilize her on screen vulnerability which contributes to her charisma and undermines the remoteness produced by her beauty and physical perfection. In the mid 50's, she was an unfamiliar female presence in the Hollywood cinema. Novak combined the glamour of classical cinema with the angst found within post-WW II culture. It isn't perhaps totally co-incidental that her breakthrough role was in William Inge's *Picnic*. Inge's work showed a particular concern for the plight of women who were struggling to give expression to their respective needs and worth in an oppressive culture.

### **Jeanne Eagels**

Of the projects Cohn chose for Novak, *Jeanne Eagels* is the most curious. Considering that *Picnic* established her as a commercial property, it seems odd to cast her in a downbeat film centred on a 20's Broadway star who, in the late silent cinema made several notable films, before dying of substance abuse. *Jeanne Eagels* is the first film in which Novak received top billing and it was conceived as a star vehicle, with her being in nearly every scene of the film. It offers her a role that demands she be taken as a serious actress, but it also presents Novak in situations that stress her physicality more than any of her previous works.

The second of four Novak films directed by George Sidney,<sup>2</sup> *Jeanne Eagels* follows *The Eddy Duchin Story* (1956) and precedes *Pal Joey*. Of these works, *The Eddy Duchin Story* gave Novak her most rewarding role and she is very good in it. *Jeanne Eagels* is the most ambitious of these Sidney films and the most flawed. Its problems in great part involve its conception and realization. The film was based on a story by Daniel Fuchs who, in 1955, won an Academy Award for the story writing of *Love Me or Leave Me*, another period biographical film concerning a young and ambitious singer, Ruth Etting (Doris Day), who nearly destroys herself in the process of achieving success. *Jeanne Eagels* has a screenplay written by Fuchs, Sonya Levien and John Fante with seemingly each concentrating on an aspect of the story: Fuchs (show business), Levien (the independent woman who aspires to fulfilment as an actress), Fante (Jeff Chandler's Sal, an Italian carnival operator, who loves Eagels but envisions her as a traditional woman wanting marriage and family). Their combined efforts, however, do not produce a good screenplay.

In the film, Eagels is doomed because she steals the lead role in *Rain* from a has-been Broadway actress who, in response, commits suicide and also because Eagels is consumed by her career. The film has a single-minded trajectory that Sidney reinforces through the expressionistic aesthetic he imposes on the film. Robert Planck's high contrast black and white photogra-

phy is striking but Sidney's expressionistic devices are intrusive and/or crude. For example, in the film's climatic scene, Eagels, descending a staircase in a low angle shot, is about to die from a combination of drugs, alcohol and exhaustion; at the moment she dies, Eagels literally drops off the screen while a shooting star is seen moving through the sky in the black background of the shot.

Novak's gives an uneven performance. She is directed to overact (as are Jeff Chandler and Agnes Moorehead) and is constricted by the film's emphatic presentation of Eagels's recklessness and her inevitable destiny. *Jeanne Eagels* offers Novak the opportunity to play a fiercely defiant woman but doesn't allow her to show much of a range. It is difficult to empathize with Eagels because, as conceived, she isn't a fully rounded character. The same is true of the Chandler and Moorehead characters. Her volatile relationship with Sal consists of a series of combative confrontations that, eventually, become merely repetitive.

As a Novak film, *Jeanne Eagels* doesn't do much to enhance her career. Nevertheless, her screen presence and commitment to the character are strong enough to handle several demanding scenes, including the dressing room encounter with the Murray Hamilton character which precipitates her death.

### **Pal Joey**

In contrast to the casting of Novak in *Jeanne Eagels*, Cohn's reasons for putting Novak in *Pal Joey* are obvious—she added to the commercial prospects of the film. The pairing of Hayworth and Novak contributed to the film's promotional publicity (will sparks fly between the former and present queen of the lot?) and Sinatra and Novak displayed strong on screen chemistry in the Preminger film. These reasons aside, Novak doesn't belong in *Pal Joey* and, as she has said repeatedly in interviews, she didn't relate to the character. The role of Linda English, a small town girl trying to break into show business, provides her with a minimum of characterization. The romantic relationship that develops between 'good girl' Linda and Joey leading to his falling in love with her, doesn't have credibility. Still, her two best moments occur after Linda and Joey become involved and she agrees to do a strip tease number because she's in love with him: The first is their 'the morning after' scene on the yacht; the second the intimate scene between them in a dressing room after Joey stops the strip tease act.

The strip tease itself is centred on the turning of a 'lady' into a 'tramp' and Linda, contrary to what she says in the dressing room after Joey stops her midway through the number, isn't 'terrible'. In fact, Novak's Linda, at the point that she stops undressing, appears to be most willing to complete the act. The strip ends before its completion because of 50s censorship restrictions but it is also in keeping with the studio's decision to rework *Pal Joey* from its original conception as a dramatic musical into that of a romantic musical comedy.

Of the two numbers given Novak, the first, in which she sings "My Funny Valentine", aligns the character with romance while the latter, the strip tease, equates her with sex. Sidney resorts to using extreme close ups of her face in shooting the first number. While she sustains the camera's scrutiny, the huge close ups aren't necessary and, arguably, become alienating. Novak doesn't need his stylistics to communicate to the viewer.





*Pal Joey*: Linda sheds her 'good girl' image

*Pal Joey* is Sinatra's film and, secondarily, Hayworth's who, despite playing a wealthy aging woman who buys herself a lover, is a delight in her musical numbers and as a light comedienne who keeps Joey on his toes.

### ***Bell, Book and Candle***

*Bell, Book and Candle* is one of Novak's best films and she is inspired casting as Gillian Holroyd, a young woman who is a witch but wants to be a mortal being capable of feeling emotion such as love or, as she finds to her regret, unhappiness. The film followed the release of *Vertigo* and reteams Novak and James Stewart who, once again, work extremely well together. As in *Vertigo*, their respective personas compliment each other and, like Hitchcock's film, *Bell, Book and Candle*, although a romantic comedy, deals with a fragile relationship. The film blends artifice (the story, the film's design) and emotional realism creating a delicate balance between the two aesthetics. Stewart, as the leading man, is more often comically irritable than romantic and, Novak, as the leading lady, is most alluring and seductive but, because of her true identity, guarded when around Stewart. It is Gillian who negotiates the film's aesthetic tensions. Novak, functioning primarily as a dramatic presence,

counterpoints the comic aspects of the film. But like Novak's character, Stewart's Shep is essentially discontented with his personal life and its most imminent prospect (marriage to a somewhat regimental fiancée) although he isn't aware of it until he meets Gillian. When he discovers that Gillian has put a spell on him so that he will desire her, he becomes angry and humiliated; but the film's emotional centre is Novak's discovery that she has actually fallen in love and become human, an experience that proves to be emotionally painful. Novak's vulnerability is at its most touching in this film.

In *Bell, Book and Candle*, stylization is a key factor to expressing the film's thematic concern and it is centred on Novak: the make up, an enhancing face that is capable of both being mask-like and expressive; the Jean Louis wardrobe that contrast black with shades of red, deep purple, pink and orange; the combined efforts of James Wong Howe's cinematography and photographer Elliot Elisofon's contribution as colour consultant—perhaps at its most stunning in the scene in which Novak bewitches Stewart.

The film is one of the highlights of Novak's career and contains a most nuanced performance. This is evident throughout the film. For instance, in the kitchen proposal scene, Gillian is





*Bell, Book and Candle*: Gillian with Pyewacket, her cat

caught off guard by Shep and the extent of his commitment to their relationship. Novak, using body movement, her eyes, her voice, conveys the mental and emotional conflict Gillian experiences in response to his declaration of love. Novak's hesitations in this scene are an early indication of the character's gradual transformation into a mortal person.

Richard Quine, who directed four of Novak's films, including her screen debut, is essential to her career. *Bell, Book and Candle* and *Strangers When We Meet* (1960), in particular, are outstanding achievements. In these two films, which are ensemble works, each is constructed around a complex and intimate relationship between the two lead protagonists.

### ***Middle of the Night***

*Middle of the Night*, written by Paddy Chayefsky and directed by Delbert Mann, the team responsible for the Academy Award winning *Marty* (1955), is a companion piece to *Picnic*. Like William Inge's *Picnic*, Chayefsky's play is about 50's America and deals with alienation and loneliness in the lives of middle and working class people. In *Middle of the Night*, Novak's Betty isn't unlike her Madge in *Picnic*, a character who is in a crisis about her future as she innately resists the conformity that society imposes on her.

In contrast to *Picnic*, *Middle of the Night*, despite the pres-

ence of Hollywood star/actor Frederic March, is a 50's 'realist' film, deglamourized in content, characterization and stylistics (influenced by both the Broadway theatre and live television, its playwrights and the medium's aesthetics). Novak plays Betty as a highly edgy character who, when confronted with decision-making, panics and becomes anxious to the point of seeming to be semi-hysterical. The intensity of this aspect of her performance has been often criticized, the implication being that Novak is out of her depth, not having the acting technique needed, as the other actors did, to deal with, as Dave Kehr puts it,<sup>3</sup> 'the language of psychological realism.' Arguably, it is Novak who is most successful in bringing a genuine feeling for her character to the film. While March tries hard to inhabit widower Jerry Kingsley, he increasingly resorts to mugging to convey the growing insecurities the character experiences as he falls in love with a woman half his age. In contrast, Novak doesn't resort to such audience attention getting tactics to express her character's responses to the situations she encounters. Although the film is about the emotional needs and lives of both Betty and Jerry, it is Betty's psychic growth that is at the core of the narrative. For instance, in a bathroom scene, Marilyn (Lee Grant), Betty's friend, attempts to convince her that taking back her ex-husband George (Lee Philips) is a better idea than marrying an old man. The scene, as written,





*Middle of the Night*: Betty tries to convince Jerry that she loves him

belongs to Grant who is very good but Novak's handling of Betty's reaction is equally impressive. Betty attentively listens to Marilyn but refuses to accept her thinking that marrying Jerry is a mistake. In the film's penultimate scene, Betty's growing self-confidence is made explicit. Jerry and Betty, having parted after an argument, meet and she tells him about seeing George again and that they spent the night together; she also tries to tell him that the encounter made her fully aware of whom she needs and wants. Novak is most effective throughout this scene, particularly so at its conclusion when Jerry, emotionally exhausted, gets up and walks away from her and the relationship.

*Middle of the Night* benefits from having Joseph Brun's atmospheric on location black and white photography. He uses both high contrast and nuanced lighting, experimenting with tone similar to that of the burgeoning French New Wave filmmakers. As with Logan's *Picnic*, Mann's *Middle of the Night* is unevenly directed and relies primarily on its screenplay to communicate meaning to the viewer. In these two films, Novak plays similar characters but in each instance she is attuned to the specifics of the respective character's emotional life.

If Novak's film career had ended with the conclusion of her Columbia contract, (fortunately, it didn't) her work during these years would have assured Novak a permanent place in the cinema. It is not without irony that she was selected by

Columbia to be an answer to Marilyn Monroe. Novak, from her screen debut in *Pushover*, demonstrated an original screen presence. She also displayed an innate understanding of characterization and its relation to narrative context. She brings awareness, intelligence and creativity to her work. It is these qualities that have given dimension to her performances and continue to make her, along with her beauty, a fascinating and complex cinematic presence.

'The Kim Novak Collection' includes Novak being interviewed by author Stephen Rebello on the making of each of the five films. It also features a segment devoted to her present day life in Oregon which she shares with veterinarian Robert Malloy, her husband. Novak left Hollywood to maintain her own identity and devote time to her love of nature and animals and a longstanding commitment to painting and other forms of creative expression. The interviews are lively, insightful, entertaining and, at times, very touching.

#### Notes

- 1 The Kim Novak Collection: Columbia Pictures, DVD 2010, Stephen Rebello interview with Novak on *Middle of the Night*.
- 2 In George Sidney's *Pepe* (1960), Novak makes a cameo appearance as 'Kim Novak'.
- 3 Kehr, David, "How Kim Novak Mixed Glamour With Gutsy": (*The New York Times*, Sunday, August 15, 2010) AR, p. 13.



# Encountering *The Thing* From Another World!

by TONY WILLIAMS

**"Despite its officially hierarchic nature, the crew appears an ideal democracy in microcosm: the atmosphere is one of voluntary service, of discipline freely accepted; a perfect balance is achieved between individual fulfilment and the responsibility of each member to the whole. The crew enact the values they are fighting for."**<sup>1</sup>

## Prologue

With Robin's passing away peacefully on December 18th, 2009, the legacy of his creative contribution to criticism remains for posterity, a legacy that should be read in detail and understood in terms of a coherent continuity rather than regarded as being contradictory. Robin's move from being a humanist to a more explicit political critic always posed a problem for those who wish to deny how ideology and politics govern human existence. For them, "early Wood" represented a non-political writer indebted to the tradition of the English literary critic F.R. Leavis who wrote distinctive prose monographs on the work of Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Claude Chabrol, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Arthur Penn and contributions in the English film journal *Movie* that seemed to represent the best traditions of any "worthy" criticism. "Late Wood" was the writer who embraced feminism, gay liberation, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, a critic who became an "ideologue." However, for those who engage in a "close reading" of Robin's work, very little difference exists between both so-called phases. Humanism, self-respect, a search for creative alternatives for everyday existence are evident in all his writing and my purpose in writing this tribute is to demonstrate the complementary nature of both his early and later work.

No real difference exists between "early Wood" and the "late Wood" who discovered the role of politics affecting everyday life and then reassessed not only his earlier work but also moved in other directions as a result. Neither did Andrew

Britton operate as a malevolent "sorcerer's apprentice" turning his gentle mentor away from the harmless aesthetic of a supposed "art for art's sake" earlier phase of criticism towards an unhealthy interest in other areas of human life that would be regarded as "bad taste". In fact, the political and personal symbiotically co-exist in the early works but operate on a more intuitive manner that later personal and political developments in Robin's life would make explicit. Rather than representing a version of Louis Althusser's "epistemological leap", this second phase of critical development is actually more coherent than disruptive, having several connections to what has been regarded as so-called "early Wood."

Both areas of Robin's work exist as a "coherent text" and to divide it is as dangerous and misleading as those attempts made years ago at separating "early Marx" and "late Marx" that claim *Das Kapital* and *Grundrisse* as being far superior to the humanistic texts of works such as *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Fortunately, a more balanced view exists today as Louis Althusser (along with Jacques Lacan and other false idols revered by *Screen*) has fallen into oblivion along with the former "radical" superstar adherents who have now either turned towards complicit neo-conservatism, postmodernism or a-political apathy, and becoming silent partners in today's oppressive institutional academic "corridors of power" that serve as part of the corporate world.

By contrast, Robin never sold out to the system throughout his entire life. His interest in the work of Michael Haneke in his last decade is very similar to what earlier attracted him to Alfred Hitchcock. Both directors depicted the bleakness of human existence within their films. Yet when Robin approached Haneke he did so with a fuller awareness of what actually motivated that bleakness, something he felt intuitively with Hitchcock works. It is also a mistake to believe that Robin rejected close reading and the influence of F.R. Leavis when he became politically involved. "Life as it should be lived", the central importance of positive human relationships, and the



# NATURAL OR SUPERNATURAL?

WINCHESTER PICTURES CORPORATION Presents

## HOWARD HAWKS'

# THE THING

*from another world!*



Publicity for *The Thing From Another World*

struggle against dehumanizing ways of life, always remained central to his vision, one that was both personal and political. Robin's later criticism has some significant parallels to Leon Trotsky's 1924 monograph *Problems of Life* which considers the role of new and positive human relationships in a changing society. Those unhappy with the latter work (as were his anti-Screen former supporters who invited him to Warwick University in the 1970s only to encounter a very different Robin Wood, far removed from the ideological image they had constructed in their minds), exhibit both insecurity and prejudice towards an understanding his work and appear bent on reducing what they see as the "political Wood" into a version of Dr. Carrington in *The Thing From Another World* (1951), if not the Thing itself! The personality of Robin and his writings defy such demeaning interpretations.

My purpose in writing this essay on *The Thing From Another World* is not only to pay tribute to a former teacher and friend I

respected deeply but also to reveal how this 1951 film illustrates many elements that he consistently championed throughout his life. The film links elements common to what has been defined as early Wood and late Wood and calls into question arbitrary definitions concerning the coherence of his actual critical legacy. Robin often said, "The life of a film is in its detail." The same applies to his criticism. Robin's legacy is really important and *The Thing From Another World* reveals continuity rather than contradiction with his later development. It is also a film that is important in any serious analysis of the work of Howard Hawks.

### Beyond the Realm of Genre

Although supposedly directed by Christian Nyby, *The Thing From Another World* is a Hawks film in all but name. Grateful to his former editor for saving him from a lawsuit by Howard Hughes concerning one scene in *Red River* where Tom



Dunson/John Wayne shoots at Matthew Garth/Montgomery Clift, Hawks obviously wished to pay his friend back by getting him a director's card.<sup>2</sup> Although this gesture was double-edged since Nyby never repeated his first success as a director and was always conscious of who was the real creative force behind the film, Hawks's involvement should be seen in terms of personal generosity to a collaborator whom he obviously regarded as being "good" in his field.<sup>3</sup> This sense of generosity fills the entire film even up to the ending where Scotty/Douglas Spencer brings aberrant Dr. Carrington/Robert Cornthwaite back into the fold despite his destructive behavior. As anybody who has seen the film will know, *The Thing* does not fall into the characteristic anti-intellectual Cold War opposition between military and mad scientist but presents unified mobilization against a dangerous threat facing everyone, one in which all representatives of the community (except the fatigued and irrational figure of Dr. Carrington) become involved. While *Rio Bravo* (1959) focuses on a small professional group and marginalizes the community into relative insignificance, *The Thing* takes on a much broader perspective. It is by no means a Marxist text but in contrast to its distinguished successor, it foregrounds a communal response to an outside threat. Every member of that surviving community is "good" in one way or another in a film that echoes the camaraderie stimulating all the members of that other professional group in *Air Force* (1943). Hence, this explains my choice of the opening quotation to introduce this essay from Robin's analysis of that earlier film. In many ways, *The Thing* continues Hawks's exploration of a professional group that fascinated him so much throughout his career. It is an ideal group existing beyond society and his conception of military professionals in both *Air Force* and *The Thing* would be unthinkable today, if not impossible in practice. The group in the later film involves civilians, military, and scientists working together in a common cause as equals perhaps less in the sense of that "ideal democracy" Robin defined in his analysis of *Air Force* but something more relevant to an ideal conception of Marxism which is what Hawks unconsciously offers as a utopian community.

Robin earlier described *The Thing* as "a minor work, but much of the feel of *Rio Bravo* is there, if in miniature."<sup>4</sup> Yet this film is far from being a first draft of "Hawks's masterpiece" having significant qualities of its own. It not only combines several Hawks themes in a highly sophisticated manner but also implies the importance of a community or group acting collectively in an integrated and intuitive manner. If the climactic battle of *Rio Bravo* owes much to Dude's spontaneous decision at the beginning of the film to place the wagons containing dynamite at a particular location where they will later become useful for the final victory as well as the unexpected appearance of Stumpy/Walter Brennan and Carlos/Pedro Gonzalez-Gonzalez, the usually stereotyped old man and the comic Mexican, to help Chance/John Wayne, *The Thing* emphasizes the collaborative action of a broader spectrum of the community that will overcome another dangerous threat against all odds. The film has no macho military leader saves the world by mobilizing fire power into action while civilians and scientists look on impotently, but one suggesting the importance of a communal type of action and an involvement having more than one type of relevant implication.

This becomes clear when we focus upon the character of Captain Pat Hendry/Kenneth Tobey. Far from being the *ubermensch* type of hero (a figure never found in Hawks's work) he, like John T. Chance of *Rio Bravo* needs, and benefits from, the help of all those on the Alaskan base to succeed in finally destroying the Thing, a result of collective, rather than individual, action. Captain Hendry also resembles that perplexed male figure from Hawks's screwball comedies such as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), *Monkey Business* (1952), and *Man's Favorite Sport!* (1964) who can never achieve anything by himself and is often thwarted by the most arbitrary circumstances in life.

### "I'll be with you in a minute, General Fogarty!"

The above reworking of the lines by David Huxley/Cary Grant to Mr. Peabody following his first experience of Susan Vance's intrusion into his previous rigid existence in *Bringing Up Baby* is by no means irrelevant. Although *The Thing* is no screwball comedy and its main hero less disorganized than his hapless predecessor, like all Hawks films, boundaries are often significantly blurred in certain instances between genres of comedy and adventure. The comic scene between Geoff Carter/Cary Grant and Bonnie/Jean Arthur in *Only Angels have Wings* (1939) where he does get "burned in the same place twice" by his inability to perform a simple domestic task and the screwball gamesmanship between Philip Marlowe/Humphrey Bogart and Vivian Sternwood/Lauren Bacall leading to the undermining of the hapless desk sergeant at the other end of the phone, are two of many examples revealing a cohesive relationship between the worlds of comedy and adventure that characterize Hawks's work. After all, didn't Robin reclassify the gangster film *Scarface* (1932) as a comedy in the very first edition of his Hawks monograph? Divisions that appear rigid in any initial generic view of a Hawks film actually become more fluid than they initially appear on further examination and this is certainly true of *The Thing From Another World*. It does not conveniently belong to any classification as a 1950s science fiction film but is more of a Hawks film blurring boundaries in the most creative manner. Did not the writer of *Howard Hawks*, a work the *Sight and Sound* establishment editor Penelope Houston felt did not belong in a series that should feature "prestigious" director, state in a later essay, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur" that it is a mistake to separate cinematic genres from each other since they really represent "different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions."<sup>5</sup> This social relevance existing within classical Hollywood genres is one needing more emphasis today than before. Similarly, Hawks's worlds of comedy and adventure represent different, but complementary, ways of treating certain issues that frequently occur in *The Thing From Another World*. It is certainly true of Captain Hendry, a character who finds himself in situations common to the different, yet-complementary, world of a Hawks comedy.

Like all leaders in the professional group, Hendry appears to be nominally in control of events but needs the help of others whenever difficult situations occur. In his one scene with General Fogarty (played by an actor whose name is significantly lacking in the credits giving the audience an idea as to his total irrelevance in this film), we learn that Hendry has already damaged military equipment and is warned by General Fogarty not



to do so again. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't smash another landing ski next time!" Hendry's reply, "That was an unavoidable accident, Sir" could easily be played for laughs had Hawks decided to cast Cary Grant in the role and make the film a comedy. As the film progresses we learn that Hendry has not only been in more than one embarrassing situation throughout his career but has actually been recently beaten in a drinking competition by Nikki/Margaret Sheridan, a humiliating posture for any self-respecting male in the ideology of typical Hollywood cinema. She also tells him, "You had moments of making like an octopus". If Dr. Carrington regards the Thing as "our superior in every way", then Nikki is Hendry's ideal companion and complement. It is she who first notices the change in temperature in the Arctic base and is the only person to suggest how to deal with the creature, paralleling the same domestic cuisine advice that Edwina/Ginger Rogers suggests to Barnaby/Cary Grant in *Monkey Business* (1952) to solve his different type of scientific dilemma. "Boil it. Stew it. Bake it. Fry it." Although antipathetic towards Hollywood representations of domesticity, perhaps the old grey fox may have had a grudging respect for female professionalism in the kitchen? By solving problems within the different contexts of these films, Hawks would regard Edwina and Nikki as being "good" in their respective ways.

The relationship between Nikki and Captain Hendry is one involving a good humored battle of the sexes, less extreme than those in *Twentieth Century* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *His Girl Friday* (1940) but one where the potential subversion of male authority by the female always exists though in less of an explicit manner than in *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949). Although the female does not gain a victory by putting her mate in drag as do Katherine Hepburn and Ann Sheridan respectively in *Bringing Up Baby* and *I Was a Male War Bride*, the potential still exists for a similar situation to occur in *The Thing*, a potential never realized but one which is possible throughout the film. In *Rio Bravo* (1959), Hawks goes as far as he possibly can to place John Wayne in drag, something Cary Grant would have had no problem with as *Bringing Up Baby* and *I Was a Male War Bride* both demonstrate. But the Duke certainly would have had problems had he understood Hawks' intentions in one particular scene where Carlos places his wife's red bloomers against Chance's thigh. Hawks's carefully concealed nuances within the lines spoken by Feathers/Angie Dickinson—"Those things have great possibilities but not on you, Sheriff!" need no emphasis. Nikki also wears trousers in *The Thing* (the only female who does so throughout the entire film) suggesting that her future domestic relationship with Captain Hendry will be one of mutual, good humored, equality.

Hendry is no macho leader at the top of a hierarchical pole giving orders that are instantly obeyed by those below him, but a figure that intuitively depends on his friends who are always there to help him. Bob/Dewey Martin, the crew chief, often offers him advice as to how to deal with situations and the superior officer accepts the advice of a non-commissioned officer relatively low on the pole of military hierarchy. Bob always ends his suggestions with the line, "I think you're right, Sir", to reassure his commanding officer that he is really in control and not to undermine him in any way. Like Carlos in *Rio Bravo*, he is always there when needed. Although Carlos's unexpected appearance towards the end of the film to help Chance, Dude,

and Colorado/Ricky Nelson may appear the most memorable example of this fact, audiences should also study closely an earlier scene where Chance confronts the cheating gambler. Carlos is at the left of the frame standing behind Chance, his hand in a vest pocket. He only withdraws his hand once he sees that Chance is fully in control of the situation. It is no stretch of the imagination to suggest that Carlos has a derringer concealed in his vest and is there to help Chance should the need arise. Despite the fact that Carlos appears to resemble the comic Mexican stereotype of most Hollywood films, his early appearance in *The Sheepman* (1958) being the most excruciating example, Hawks has not only invested the actor with a dignity undercutting his usual demeaning stereotyped roles but also intuitively paved the way for his later appearance in the film fighting alongside the professional group.

Chance and Hendry "get by with a little help from my friends" in more ways than one. Hendry allows his junior officers to tease him in a manner unthinkable within the strict confines of military life. In one sense, they do not respect his authority in the traditional manner, but in the non-traditional world of Howard Hawks, their behavior represents a good-natured playfulness that their superior officer intuitively comprehends. One lieutenant actually comments upon Hendry's frequent visits to see Nikki, something which would earn him the charge of insubordination had they been within the domain of General Fogarty. "We go up there every three weeks just like lover's lane." At the end of the film Bob and the two junior officers collaborate in arranging Captain Hendry's future plans. Bob suggests, "You ought to settle down, Sir"—an idea approved by Nikki, "See, they know what's good for you." This particular world of Howard Hawks represents his version of an egalitarian and collective society, far removed from civilization then and now, comprising a group of friends and allies operating together for the common good. This is not explicitly Marxist but the humanitarian ideals of this group within the film also suggest that a collective society need not be inhumane, something that past institutional attempts at making Marx's ideas work have so far failed to realize. The community in *The Thing* is also egalitarian by nature as the figure of Bob reveals.

### **"I think you're right, sir!"**

The role of Dewey Martin, listed in the credits as "crew chief", (but known to everyone in the film by his first name Bob) is a key element in the film. He is a younger version of that other indispensable character played by Harry Carey in *Air Force* (1943) but he also operates in a more direct manner. While the older character is conscious of hierarchy and rank in his institution and never steps beyond it, Bob often does so in a manner transcending the everyday divisions of society intuitively followed by others of a higher rank to his. When he first approaches Captain Hendry with a suggestion that the watch over the Thing be changed more regularly, he ends his sentence with the line, "I think you're right, Sir", something that Hendry intuitively recognizes as a suggestion that is not meant to question his authority but rather one made by somebody he generously regards as an equal who wishes to help him. Hendry smiles knowingly as he takes up this suggestion. Bob tells a superior officer, "Hook this wire up, won't you, Lieutenant?" and then



adds, "You can be ordering me around once we get to the other end, Sir." It is Bob who instantly gives orders over the intercom telling people to stay where they are before the Thing's first attack without being ordered to by his superior. He also comes up with the idea of using kerosene to set their alien opponent on fire. As Bob pours the kerosene into a bucket moments before the attack, he abruptly tells a superior officer, "Watch that cigarette, Lieutenant!" Ranks appear reversed when Bob later asks the Lieutenant, "Did you do a good job on the outside door?" When they all await the Thing's final attack, it is Bob who can read the mind of an enemy they should never underestimate. "If he thinks too long, we're cold meat." Before the final battle, Bob not only collaborates with one of the scientists in constructing the Electric Fly Trap but also offers advice to this expert. When the scientist suggests using high voltage electricity to destroy the Thing, Bob offers his own practical suggestions as to how this device can operate effectively. Normal civilized barriers between enlisted man and scientist dissolve in an environment far away from the hierarchical structure presided over by General Fogarty, a world characterized by military jargon that the group on their return journey to the Alaska base humorously send up by satirizing its irrelevant and unnecessary nature.

Rather than being an exception, Bob articulates the collective union of the entire group made up of military, scientists, and one civilian reporter from the outside world, all of whom contribute to the eventual success of their goal in one way or another. Although playing a marginal role in the film, Mrs. Chapman/Sally Creighton instantly announces her own professional status as medical orderly when the surviving scientist from the Thing's attack appears in a wounded condition. "That's my job, Captain." It is her husband who appeals to Carrington to understand the reality of the dangerous situation they face and who calls him by his first name, "Arthur."

### "Our superior in every way"

Dr. Carrington can easily be regarded as the stereotyped mad scientist of this particular drama. But to do so makes a travesty of his role and the way Hawks has conceived him. As Robin pointed out, he is far from that. "Carrington—while he is the perfect opponent of everything Hawks, with his 'primitive' feeling for spontaneity and instinct stands for—is never made absurd: he is on the contrary consistently presented as intelligent, dedicated and courageous, willing to die for his beliefs."<sup>6</sup> He apologizes for his vagueness and misinterpretation of Hendry's action at least twice in the film. He resembles another version of Tom Dunson who has become monstrous due to his obsessive and single-minded quest. Carrington is a character who appears aloof and authoritarian showing no concern for the safety of his own scientific group when they discover the Thing. If Matthew Garth represents the alternative to the ruthless monster that Tom Dunson has become in *Red River*, then the Thing (James Arness) itself depicts the monster that exists in the scientific id of Carrington, one that embodies the logical consequences of the inhumanity existing within his own personality as well as a threat to human existence.<sup>1</sup> (Significantly, in my Fall 2010 Hawks class art major Mackenzie Prather also noted that the Thing represented the violent repressed side of Dr. Carrington himself reacting against the constraints of a soci-

ety he felt alien towards) In one sense, the Thing is a perverse example of superiority. It is not only vegetable and free from animal passions but is also a bi-sexual being capable of reproducing itself and solving the issue of sexual relationships. As opposed to the original John W. Campbell Jr. short story "Who Goes There?" (1938), that suggests the presence of other aliens in the spaceship trapped in Antarctica for millions of years, the Thing is both on its own and a being of aggressive violence. Parallels also exist with other characters in the universe of Howard Hawks. Harry Morgan/Humphrey Bogart is about to hit Mr. Johnson/Walter Sande on his boat in *To Have and Have Not* (1944) when Eddie prevents him stressing their need for money. Slim/Lauren Bacall later performs the same necessary function in the film by restraining Harry from using unnecessary violence. Frenchy/Marcel Dalio prevents Harry from killing the Vichy police officers in his room. Had he not performed this act Harry would have been unable to rescue Eddie and arrange exit visas from Martinique with the reluctant aid of Captain Renaud/Dan Seymour. Any friend in the Hawks universe always has the best interests of the hero in mind and operates as a necessary restraining force in any situation that may go out of control to everyone's detriment.

A Hawks hero needs the help of his/her friends if only to restrain that monstrous aggression deeply imbedded within their own personalities and make them more balanced human beings. Dude also restrains Chance at one point in *Rio Bravo* but later characters such as Cole Thornton/John Wayne in *El Dorado* (1966) and Cord McNally/John Wayne in *Rio Lobo* (1970) become little better than the Thing on a rampage in certain scenes in those later Hawks films that Robin felt grave reservations about. However, if the Thing represents the violent extreme monstrous culmination of Dr. Carrington's solitary and dehumanizing attitudes, the latter figure is still human and makes a last ditch attempt to appeal to the Thing by attempting to communicate with it. However, even this last attempt at a human relationship is doomed to failure. Recognition of lack of sleep (similar to Dunson) affecting judgment as well as the Hawks concept that even the worst of us deserves a second chance brings Carrington back into the fold at the end of *The Thing* in the same way that Dunson is at the climax of *Red River*. It is a very thin line that separates any Hawks character from becoming dangerously obsessive by falling into one-dimensional patterns of behavior, patterns that may turn violent and often the restraining role of friends prevent this. In many ways, the Thing itself represents a return of the repressed metaphorically embodying those obsessive, negative, and violent features that may exist in anyone's personality—a concept that Robin would later explore in his work on the horror film. It embodies not only the logical consequences of Dr. Carrington's inhumane and non-empathetic realms of science but also the potentially dangerous, violent tendencies that also exist in any Hawks hero.

Finally, I wish to claim that *The Thing From Another World* as a key contribution to those films classified by Robin as a trilogy—*Only Angels have Wings*, *To Have and Have Not*, and *Rio Bravo*—but more in the sense of recognizing an unconscious political sensibility that Hawks never realized was inherent in his films, a path Robin understood *consciously* in the second phase of his critical odyssey. During his last detailed examination of *Rio Bravo*, Robin saw many Left overtones in the film but also



recognized its most important message as being "power over oneself, self-control, the means to the development of self-respect" as well as an awareness of the danger of going too far.<sup>9</sup> Again, one of the key problems concerning any positive realization of a Marxist society involves that of power, one usually conceived of as power over others, a power than can sometimes go too far into inhumane directions. Like his successor Cole Thornton in *El Dorado*, Dr. Carrington also goes too far like his predecessor Tom Dunson. But he is brought back into the fold at the end of the film with Scotty's spin-doctoring of the real events, one done with the best intentions and not deviously manipulating the actual facts of the situation, facts that involved collective action on the part of everyone on the base. Carrington has suffered from injuries during the battle by trying to communicate with the Thing rather than passively awaiting his own destruction. He may have his own particular agenda in mind but he does attempt some form of communication before the Thing uses violence against the one person on the base it had something in common with. Later Scotty generously redeems Carrington recognizing that fatigue and ill-judgment have motivated his behavior rather than any inherent evil existing in his personality. In one sense, like Dunson, Carrington deserves to die at the end of the film due to his ruthless activities. He is also, as Robin describes Dunson, "a fascist in all but name."<sup>9</sup> But Hawks allows both characters to live. The significance of the end of *Red River* is less Hawks allowing Dunson "to revert abruptly to the role of 'Mr. Nice Guy'"<sup>10</sup> but in recognizing that a professional has "gone too far" due to worry, lack of sleep (like Carrington), deciding to conquer circumstances beyond his control without the aid of those willing to help him. *Red River*, Groot tells Matthew that the tyrannical Dunson is also scared, something he conceals, and that partly explains his tyrannical behavior until he goes too far. If Bat Kilgallon/Richard Barthelmess can be brought back into the fold in *Only Angels Have Wings* and given that important second chance, unlike his predecessor in John Ford's *Air Mail* (1932), similar opportunities of redemption exist for both Dunson and Dr. Carrington. Here, I must disagree with Robin (who sadly can not be here to say, "Yes, but...") in stating that the death of both men could be the logical culmination of their roles in their respective narratives but this would also violate the essential humane characteristic of a director who believed that even those who have fallen far from grace deserve a second chance.

Towards the end of the film everybody unites to fight the Thing—civilian newspaper man Scotty, the scientists, and the military—with no dissension among their ranks unlike characters in the films of George A. Romero. This type of non-partisan unity represents an ideal oppositional movement both personally and politically. Although Dr. Carrington is their nominal leader, the scientists (whose concerns are articulated by Dr. Creighton/John Dierkes) question his authority and bad judgment in the same way that the cowboys do Dunson's irrational behavior in *Red River*. Like Matthew Garth, Creighton is their spokesman articulating feelings that are common to everyone on the base once the dangerous threat represented by the Thing becomes recognized. In *The Thing* people put aside their differences to unite and it is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to see this in political terms. This type of unity against a common danger is especially relevant to our current

society where mass apathy is the rule and no collective opposition appears to exist in any coherent form against the dehumanizing manifestation of contemporary capitalism. The Thing embodies such features with its lack of human characteristics, non-emotional behavior, and ruthless utilitarian goals (like a University administrator making decisions on statistical grounds deliberately avoiding any personal considerations in matters that affect human beings), exhibiting no empathy towards others, and having total dedication to destruction. In other words, this "alien" may also be seen as embodying the mechanism of our era's contemporary capitalism, using and abusing human beings, and accelerating the destruction of our planet. The collective opposition in *The Thing* represents fertile seeds for a more humanitarian type of Marxist society than has existed so far in human history.

Robin always maintained continuity in his admiration for Hawks throughout his life while seeing the problematic personal and political flaws inherent in the films of Ingmar Bergman and Alfred Hitchcock when he later reassessed the work of these two directors. It is a shame that Robin is most celebrated for his work on Hitchcock because, as "good" as it is, the book revealed a blocking of the personal and political inherent within that director's work and suggested no way forward beyond this dilemma unless a change occurred in society by implication. By contrast, Robin's monograph on Hawks, as well as the films themselves, especially *The Thing From Another World*, offered that way forward, one in which qualities of self-respect, mutual understanding, collective involvement including the widest possible inclusion of elements of gender and race working towards a better world for everyone became less than a distant possibility. *Rio Bravo* is the culmination of this utopian desire but the *Thing From Another World* also runs a close second in its emphasis upon the necessity for collective action by a group far more numerous than the one that characterizes the later film. It represents not only a key film relevant to Robin's first critical phase but also operates in the ideal manner of a coherent text in more senses than one.

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## Notes

- 1 Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks*. New Edition. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2006, 89.
- 2 See Todd McCarthy, *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood* (New York: Grove Press, 1997, 441, 475.
- 3 Years later, Nyby explained the influence in the following manner. "When you are being taught to paint by Rembrandt, you don't take the brush out of his hand. You listen and watch him paint. The same when you're working with a great director like Howard Hawks. Quoted by McCarthy, 481.
- 4 Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks*, 101.
- 5 Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 292. The material originally appeared in *Film Comment* 13.1 (1977): 46-51. See also the very pertinent arguments raised recently by Juan A. Tarancon, "Genre Matters: Film Criticism and the Social Relevance of Genres." *CineACTION* 80 (2010): 13-21.
- 6 Wood, *Howard Hawks*, 105.
- 7 Significantly, three decades later James Arness would play John Wayne's original role of Tom Dunson in a 1988 TV remake of *Red River*.
- 8 Robin Wood, *Rio Bravo*. London: BFI Publishing, 2003, 58.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 13.



# ANTONIONI'S ORGY

by GEORGE PORCARI

Lucretius, who was certainly one of the greatest poets who ever lived, once said: "Nothing appears as it should in a world where nothing is certain. The only thing certain is the existence of a secret violence that makes everything uncertain". Think about this for a moment. What Lucretius said of his time is still a disturbing reality, for it seems to me this uncertainty is very much a part of our own time. But this is unquestionably a philosophical matter. Now you don't really expect me to resolve such problems or to propose any solutions?

—Michelangelo Antonioni. A Talk with Michelangelo Antonioni—answering questions at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia of Rome on March 16, 1961. It originally appeared in the school's monthly periodical *Bianco e Nero* with the title "La Malattia dei Sentimenti" and is anthologized in Antonioni's writings in *The Architecture of Vision* by Michelangelo Antonioni, Marsilio Publishers New York 1995.





...your art consists in leaving the road of meaning open and as if undecided—out of scrupulousness.

—*Dear Antonioni* by Roland Barthes ©Editions du Seuil  
Translated by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith

The forty year anniversary of *Zabriskie Point* in 2010 is a welcome time to reassess the film, its effects on the public who first saw it at the beginning of the seventies, and to assess the qualifications of the film's detractors over the years. *Zabriskie Point* was made in 1969 and released the following year, falling in Michelangelo Antonioni's filmography between *Blow-Up* in 1966 and *The Passenger* in 1972. Before *Blow-Up* there had been *Red Desert* (1964) a film about the industrial wasteland of Ravenna Italy and the inhabitants who work in the factories and try to adapt to the environment as best as they can. *Zabriskie Point* can be seen as the uneasy middle film in a "desert trilogy" of films about literal or figurative deserts alongside *Red Desert* and *The Passenger* that was filmed partially in Northern Africa. All three films are about couples that attempt, each in their own

*Red Desert*: Monica Vitti



## THANKS ROBIN

It is a pleasure to be included in an issue devoted to Robin Wood. I first encountered his criticism in the short beautiful books published by Praeger Film Library in the early seventies. This was my introduction to the "close reading" that Wood specialized in. I was—as the British say—gobsmacked. His writing was something that was a universe away from the conventional "thumbs up/down" review that I was used to from reading newspapers and magazines. Robin Wood brought to film writing a depth, lucidity and sense of personal involvement and importance not seen anywhere—except in the "high" literary criticism of the last century where it was expected. Of course film criticism was taken very seriously by people before Robin Wood—as seen most famously in the group around *Cashiers du Cinema* but their cinephilia was still tied to the short review that—whatever its merits—they had inherited from the previous generations. Academic writers who did PhD thesis' on film subjects were also serious—to a fault—but the esoteric academic language that was required of them made their work for the most part hermetic, impersonal, and pedantic.

The revolution that Robin—along with a few other writers—were involved with was a close-reading that—in a nutshell—came from literary criticism meant for a general audience of readers—that is people who loved literature. When Robin Wood was writing in the sixties and seventies no one thought film writing could be on a par with T.S. Eliot's essays on Renaissance Troubadours or Jean Paul Sartre's magnificent study of Rimbaud. They were similar only that they used words but they were perceived to be in separate categories—as different as chalk and cheese. A handful of people changed all of that: As examples we can name—aside from Robin—Susan Sontag's essays on Resnais and Godard, Peter Wollen's book on *Singin' in the Rain* and Roland Barthes' essay on Michelangelo Antonioni among others.

My essay on *Zabriskie Point* in this issue runs counter to the arguments in Wood's book on the Italian master—but the difference of opinion is beside the point—thinking through things, feeling deeply and writing clearly about work is what matters.

The "close-reading" as a method is, unfortunately, inimical to the high speed, brevity and simplicity demanded in our contemporary global consumer culture whose corporate prejudices have been internalized by the population at large—to our detriment. If the close-reading survives it is thanks to small galleries and journals (such as *CineAction*) that keep it alive and can perhaps, one hopes, pass the light to another generation that will be as inspired as I was when I first picked up Robin Wood's books on Ingmar Bergman and Satyajit Ray and a whole new world opened up. Thanks Robin.

—George Porcari





*Zabriskie Point*: Rod Taylor plays the CO of a real estate company

way, to adapt to the society they find themselves in. This adaptation, or the failure to achieve it, is what ultimately fascinates Antonioni yet his narratives are by turns enigmatic and melodramatic just as his framing is both tightly organized and meandering. This paradoxical approach often leaves audiences perplexed. In *Zabriskie Point* these qualities would be taken to new extremes—in a manner not seen outside of avant-garde films—as Antonioni experimented with narrative, framing and editing within the context of the feature film.

In *Red Desert* the woman played by Monica Vitti tries to adapt herself to an industrial, polluted wasteland that she is forced to endure as it is the landscape of her husband's job in a power plant. The men throughout the film seem completely oblivious to the bizarre dystopia they have helped to create and to the resultant alienation Vitti is experiencing. After suffering a nervous breakdown she learns slowly to adapt to the industrial environment and to help her young son do the same. In *The Passenger* the woman played by Maria Schneider is a young would-be architect who is just beginning to play out her passion for architecture by studying the work of Gaudi. The man, played by Jack Nicholson, is a middle-aged reporter, burned out from his job, his passion dissipated, he drifts along where his job takes him with little of the enthusiasm that propelled him to want to be a reporter—that is—to uncover the “truth”—in the first place. He attempts to forge a new identity in the shifting world of post industrial, post-colonial tribal allegiances and

international gun running. He succeeds only too well. As the relationship with the young woman architect is on the verge of succeeding because of who he is he is killed for who he is presumed to be. His character is in the right place and the right time (for love) and the wrong place at the wrong time (for death) at precisely the same moment. In that sense he shares much with Film-Noir anti-heroes such as those in *Out of the Past* and *The Blue Dahlia*. In *Red Desert* Monica Vitti can be said to achieve a grudging success in her adaptation to the wasteland around her albeit tempered by a pathos and melancholy at a world that man has created that is grotesque in comparison to the paradise that he was given—a paradise that Antonioni gives us in a brief dream sequence. In *The Passenger* the reporter can cross all class and regional boundaries but feels—perhaps for this very reason—removed and alienated from the world that he is being paid to describe. *Zabriskie Point* is also about a man and a woman played by Mark Frechette and Daria Halprin (significantly their real as well as their fictional names) who attempt in their own ways to adapt to their environment—the United States in 1969. The woman succeeds to a degree and the man fails and is killed. What is this adaptation about and how does it work in the plot developed by Sam Shepard, Franco Ressetti, Toninno Guerra, Clare Peploe and Antonioni? How does it fit into this “desert trilogy”? Does the use of non professional actors in the two lead roles (as opposed to the other two films which used professional actors) wreck the film as some have



suggested or was this a conscious decision that bears reassessment as part of the film's thematic ends? And if so what are those ends?

The film was perceived upon its release to be an attack on capitalist America that was sympathetic to the far left in its program of confrontation with a surging corporate state—what Allen Ginsberg described as “Machine America”. Despite the brilliance of the images in *Zabriskie Point*, that are generally acknowledged as belonging to Antonioni's best work, the narrative and the acting, particularly by the two stars of the film are often derided both when the film came out in 1970 and subsequently as unnatural artificial and detrimental to the overall success of the film. Seymour Chatman in his fine book on Antonioni writes: “...the film is hard to read except as a portrayal of the American scene, as a defense of revolutionary youth and as an attack on a materialism that finds its ripest head in Southern California. Despite certain marvelous details there are many mistakes in Antonioni's reconstruction of Sunbelt people and preoccupations.”<sup>1</sup> For Chatman and for many critics of the film the problems begin at the beginning. While the student meeting that opens the film, while the credits roll, between the members of the Black Panther Party and a Student Union is beautifully shot it was made clear by many who understood the various factions within the left that there was little or no contact (in real life) between the student movement and the Black Panther Party. The former was essentially a white phenomenon and restricted to the anti-war movement and was working—with perhaps more sentiment than any kind of clear agenda—toward a more European or Socialist model of society. The Black Panther Party was a revolutionary movement with a quasi Marxist agenda filtered through radical anti-slavery movements of the past and civil rights movements of the present (1969) and dedicated to the taking of political power. The two distrusted each other and in many cases were openly antagonistic and contemptuous. Was Antonioni oblivious to this chasm or did he consciously create this “fiction”—this meeting of blacks and whites for some other purpose? And if so what might that be?

Certainly Antonioni was not adverse to creating a fictional reality that bore little resemblance to “reality” when making a film. When he made *Blow-Up* (1966) more than one person involved in the making of the film—including the guitarist Jimmy Page—made the observation that when the Yardbirds played in clubs people danced ecstatically like mad for hours while Antonioni famously had his club goers listening to the music in a coma like state of inertia looking blandly on as the group played in an obvious state of delight. The audience come to life only after Jeff Beck breaks his guitar in two—in the manner of Pete Townsend of the Who—and throws the neck of the guitar into the audience creating pandemonium as everyone fights for the prized broken guitar neck. The zombified audience who occasionally look at the camera with indifference seem to haunt the film in a peculiar way that is disturbing, enigmatic and psychologically powerful. The way the audience goes from total inertia to a hysterical mob in a matter of seconds is also disturbing. What are we to make of it? Antonioni on more than one occasion said that what he was after was in fact not to capture reality with his camera but what lay underneath reality. “We know that under the revealed image there is another one which is more faithful to reality, and under this one there is

yet another, and again another under this last one, down to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see.”<sup>2</sup> In this effort he literally painted the industrial machinery in *Red Desert* (primary colors) and the trees in the park in *Blow-Up* (purple).

Antonioni in that sense can be said to be if not a metaphysical filmmaker like Tarkovsky at least someone whose work is concerned with exploring that aspect of reality in depth. Tarkovsky also sought the “real reality underneath the one we see” and so did one of Antonioni's favorite directors: Carl Dryer. For such artists of course merely conveying metaphysics through washed out or out of focus visuals (as was commonplace then and now) is not acceptable. Reality itself must be present and yield this window to other realities—then and only then does the metaphysics carry any weight. Films such as *The Holy Mountain* by Alejandro Jodorowski and *The Bible* by John Huston despite their radical differences in style are good examples of filmmaking that does not make any effort to earn the gravitas of their own metaphysics but seek simply to illustrate an *idea* about metaphysics. When we see the young audience for the Yardbirds we do not see indifference but rather a willful almost religious absence of emotion. It is as if they were performing some rite in a religious sect whose rules are unknown to us. They are in that sense not passive at all but fully expressing their inner state. For surely this is Antonioni's point—that the technocracy and rationalism of the west that had replaced the relatively stable mystical and religious world that preceded it had created an overwhelming and insuperable spiritual passivity—a passivity that is now a way of being. The audience for the Yardbirds only come alive when an object is introduced in the mix that they can possess: a religious relic touched by the chosen stars. The religious metaphor is not lost as the guitar neck, like the chunks of the cross that were fought over in an older age, is a magic talisman that can link its owner to the world of the divine. For Antonioni (and for Tarkovsky as well) the idea that one could have a material link of this sort, through an actual object, is absurd and comical. The divine for both artists is something that one apprehends by contemplation and reflection—not by possessions—regardless of their religious aura. In effect the audience for the Yardbirds is emotionally and spiritually inert and this inertia is made all the more palatable by the very fact that the most advanced dance music of the time is being played live before them. That is why their inertia is both comical and disturbing.

Just as the Yardbirds playing is put on not to showcase the Yardbirds but to delve into a spiritual malaise so with the meeting of radicals that opens *Zabriskie Point*. Their talk is banal: essentially planning a demonstration, the possible responses by the police and the best ways to preemptively manage the confrontation. What the film shows is a war room in action and that is the critically important aspect of this scene. The United States was at war in various fronts in 1969—the most famous of these is obviously Vietnam—but there were several wars going on at home: there was the war of the corporate classes against the surging youth culture that mistrusted it, of poor blacks and third world immigrants against middle and upper class whites fighting for the meager available wealth, of women against the presumed authority and power of an outmoded patriarchy, and of the intellectual classes against the already established orders



of power within academic institutions. What Antonioni does is consolidate those wars into one. He lucidly brings all of these groups into one room to air their grievances as if they had been doing it for years because he is after the truth underlying their divisions. He shoots the meeting with the fluid motions of a hand held 16mm documentary camera but the format and grain tell us that it is a large and heavy Panavision camera—a piece of equipment impossible to carry—so the “hand-held” aspect is a fiction—the meeting never happened. The fictional aspect is emphasized by the use of colored gels as in Godard’s *Contempt* and *Pierrot Le Fou* that were also shot with a Panavision camera. Antonioni’s cinematographer Alfio Contini at certain moments throughout the film, not just at the opening scene, uses his large format camera in the manner of a hand held 16mm camera—normally associated with documentary films—and at times even Super-8—normally associated with home movies. He does this by brilliantly mimicking their conventions. For example the shots of Los Angeles seen from the inside of Mark’s truck beautifully reproduces the effects of the popular zoom feature in Super-8 cameras that compresses space establishing large areas of the frame that are out of focus creating a sense of abstraction and dislocation.

Zabriskie Point is the lowest point in the North American continent—a desert that is a part of Death Valley—a baking land mass of 3,000 square miles that covers parts of California and Nevada. It is both symbolically and literally a place “under the radar”—a kind of limbo in which participants tired of urban hells of one kind or another can come and experience a landscape that by its very nature puts the brevity of human life and the relative significance of social responsibilities into perspective. In *Zabriskie Point* there is a brief film within a film, a short advertising for “Sunny Dunes Estates”, a real estate development company, that puts the desert in a very different perspective. This hilarious film insists with a voice over done by a “professional” sounding radio voice that Death Valley is the place where one can retire to hunt, play golf, water one’s garden and lounge with no urban cares or worries. Of course the Sunny Dunes film advertising—one of the most brilliant parts of the film—uses a simulated “nature” to represent Nature. The estates are obviously another form of hell—different in kind only from the urban environment from which people are seeking escape. The sequence has a happy couple—a male and female mannequin that mimic Mark and Daria—but now seen as a “happy suburban couple”—modern pioneers—who are on the fringes of civilization and bring its most advanced component—rationalist modernism—with them. What the developers casually ignore is that it’s called Death Valley for a reason, and the project known as “Civilization”—at least as it is understood by a European of Mr. Antonioni’s education and temperament—is about to crash and burn somewhere over this forbidding inhuman landscape. This is after all where the American Air Force—the most advanced war machine on earth—test experimental aircraft and rockets. The point being that if something goes wrong the casualties are minimal. The sequence captures the encroachment of Los Angeles into the desert and has a strongly ironic component that is brought dramatically to the foreground, but unlike academic exercises that attempt this kind of irony Antonioni never lets the rhetorical aspect take control. On the contrary, he invents brilliant points from which to

shoot the film within a film and he captures the surfaces of plastic and glass, playing them off against the faux natural surfaces of sand and desert plants—all of course fake.

The color palette is tan, brown and orange—a conscious choice that serves to highlight the artificiality of the Sunny Dunes homes while playing them off against the cooler grays of the people sitting around a conference table smoking with a funereal seriousness while watching the commercial. It is as if someone had told them that only half the people in the room are going to get out alive and they must now decide which half. In effect this is more or less the situation. The stakes are very high and the violence under the surface is palpable. The Sunny Dunes commercial has a fake bird being held aloft by wires that the mannequin man shoots with a toy gun. The sequence both mimics the realistic violence that ends the film with the shooting of Mark and parallels the absurd frozen chicken that later in the film floats through space in slow motion. The female mannequin cooks (of course) in a modernist kitchen overlooking the desert while the male mannequin waters his garden with a hose (of course) with plentiful water available for all. This is the water problem depicted brilliantly in *Chinatown* turned into a farce by corporate advertising. The Sunny Dunes short film describes a fantasy that is being sold—literally by the square foot—as reality—and the overall effect is grotesquely comical. It is one of the most brilliant set pieces that Antonioni ever accomplished and remains to this day one of the most stunning criticisms of the corporate world and its relation to consumerism and media control. The fact that those very corporate values would be incorporated and internalized by the culture at large in subsequent years only highlights the prescient insights that Antonioni is able to show us in a sequence that lasts 1 minute and 20 seconds.

Daria on her road trip comes upon a bar in the middle of the desert in which old timers, including the middle-weight champion of the world from a bygone era, is having a beer. She drinks with them casually and then goes outside where some children are playing. They all gravitate toward a stage that stands baking in the desert along with a broken piano that a boy plays by strumming the gutted strings creating an atonal sonata that is appropriately disturbing and otherworldly. The boys are uneasily balanced between some feral clan and a rural country gang, somewhat bored and quite obviously with no direction home. They are perhaps the sons from the commune that Daria has been asking about which would explain their openly asking her if they “can have a piece of ass”. Daria asks them with some trepidation if they would know what to do with it. At that point the boys begin to push and shove and Daria makes a run for it. As she makes her way back on the road the camera—instead of following her escape as would happen in a conventional film—slowly and lovingly pans forward to the window of the bar as we see the old champ sipping his beer to the sound of Patti Page’s *Tennessee Waltz*. It’s a brief and beautiful farewell to another era—one that American directors themselves were too busy to express in the excitement of the time but that Antonioni just managed to pull off—using veteran actors from an older more creative and inventive Hollywood that was soon to be replaced by a more efficient corporate model—along the lines of the commercial for Sunny Dunes Estates.





*Zabriskie Point*: Daria, played by Daria Halprin, and the exploding modernist house

Daria has been summoned to the desert by her boss who is attempting to sell Sunny Dunes lots to developers in a modernist mansion in the middle of the desert that resembles a ship that has landed on a lifeless planet. The mansion is being used to house all the participants in the sale. As one would expect the boss seeks to turn the event into a vacation weekend with his assistant that he hopes will become his mistress while he finalizes the deal with the developers. While traveling in the desert Daria meets Mark who is escaping from the police for being the lone suspect in a police killing during a student

demonstration in a university. Mark flies a stolen private plane and Daria drives a car. They meet in the desert and Mark literally swoops down on her. They become, albeit for a very brief time, a couple. Their banter—forced and self-conscious—is often delivered in a hesitant monotone. The effect is of course to make us conscious of watching acting but not in the Brechtian sense or even in Fassbinder's, Pasolini's or Godard's use of Brechtian distancing devices in more recent work. Rather the film seems to document uneasiness, uncertainty, and a willful integrity that *refuses to act*, that is at odds with anything artificial including



cinematic conventions of acting themselves. It is in this refusal that the actors in *Zabriskie Point* collide with narrative expectations. They are a romantic couple in a road movie and the genre—already well trodden in 1969—has conventions and expectations built into it. The interiority of the lead actors—the reasons for this refusal—is something Antonioni cannot capture with his camera. The desire is there but not the result. Nevertheless the actors are in their way speaking truth to power in the most candid manner possible: in front of a camera that picks up every nuance of action—or lack of it—and every sound and silence. To see Mark and Daria “act” is to witness an arm wrestling match between Antonioni and his actors in which neither side can claim victory. In a culture that is heading headlong into an abyss of “Entertainment Reality”—the margins of which were clearly visible even then—they say no. That in itself is extraordinary. But there is another area where Mark and Daria can communicate. It is in their physical contact with each other and with the landscape around them that they are most forcefully open, relaxed and exuberant. It is no accident that words get in the way. Mark paints “No Words” on the side of his stolen plane. Antonioni himself expressed doubts: “Someone once said that words, more than anything else, serve to hide our thoughts.”<sup>3</sup>

The actor’s relation to the landscape is a healthy one of respect, admiration and play. They don’t fuck but rather make love in the desert—an important distinction that implies an element of play and of childlike fun. Antonioni depicts the love-making in slow close-up pans of their bodies in the sand to the music of Jerry Garcia’s improvisations on guitar. Garcia is a composer and musician—a founding member of the San Francisco group The Grateful Dead—whose music is most associated with a meandering psychedelia free of the rationalist impulses found in traditional western music. Its closest antecedents are perhaps middle eastern music and medieval drones. Other contemporaneous groups—most famously The Beatles—were of course working along similar lines. Garcia makes the perfect soundscape for the transition from Daria and Mark’s lovemaking to the orgy of young people in the desert that follows. That love-making which seems to spring from Daria and Mark’s coupling is not really lovemaking in the traditional sense at all so perhaps the term orgy itself is misleading. The professional dancers—members of Joe Chaikin’s Open Theater—mime a ballet of males and females playing with each other, exploring each other, mimicking the play of children but with adult bodies and an adult sexuality. The two are not separate as in the traditional rationalist model—wherein one leaves behind the creative play of childhood to assume adult sexuality, adult responsibilities and adult ambitions.

The Open Theater group were carefully rehearsed by Antonioni who showed them physically exactly the motions he wanted, yet his original intention was to have a cast of thousands in the desert but could only come with the two dozen that make up the troop. In some respects this worked in his favor as a group that large would have been somewhat anonymous and surreal while the actors he ends up with are both professional enough to mime this adult play effectively and their relatively small number allow us to see details that would have gotten lost in the crowd. The intertwining bodies catch the sparkling desert sand on their bodies, faces and long hair

creating sculptural tableaux that are reminiscent of European friezes but whose gestures and expressions are far from the heroic and “timeless” poses of a bygone Classicism. On the contrary the gestures encased in the “sand sculptures” in *Zabriskie Point* depict everyday transitory mortal pleasures and nuanced movements suggesting physical intimacy as a form of non-verbal communication. While this might sound like common sense the idea is revolutionary as it proposes—as a counter to American pragmatism and the consumer society that it has created—an orgy in nature as Man’s *natural state*. In effect women and men return to nature and become one with it. This orgy is clearly a pagan rite of the pre-Christian era but filtered through a benign hippie mindset—the episode in effect has a similar function to the paradise sequence from *Red Desert* in that it allows us to catch a glimpse of the world that the characters might want to make or might have made under different circumstances but one that of course will never be. The hippie ethos that is not so much explored as given a voice through Joe Chaikin’s theater group allows us to see with greater clarity the contrary position of the Sunny Dunes aesthetic announced with guns blazing (literally) in their promotional film. The hippie aesthetic suggested by Antonioni’s orgy, if one has to reduce something so disparate and heterogeneous to a brief summation, would be the acquisition of self-knowledge, the promotion of meditation, sexual frankness and the insistence that there must be a more holistic relationship to the planet as a whole. That such an ethos consciously avoids some fundamental contradictions within human beings—such as our profoundly innate sense of violence, sadism, masochism, repression and will to power is something that Antonioni is conscious of and explores in perhaps the most explosive ending (in every sense) in film history. Antonioni ends the orgy scene with a slow pan of the depopulated desert, the sand sculpted in such a way that we see the imprint of human bodies that were once there, playing and making love, but are no longer present. Nature trumps philosophies in Antonioni’s world regardless of how benign or insufferably egocentric. In that sense both Sunny Dunes and the hippie orgy are merely very small and very temporary marks in a desert that will far outlive the traces that humans leave on it.

Mark returns to Los Angeles with his stolen plane—now painted bright pink and with various slogans of the time including “No Words”. The police are ready upon his return and shoot him dead. Antonioni films the line of police wearing protective gear in the manner of Goya’s executioner’s: anonymous agents of the state doing a job. Daria returns to the modernist mansion where the men are trying without much success to finish a deal while their women lounge poolside and chat. She momentarily stops by a decorative waterfall—the ultimate desert luxury—and cries. Antonioni’s contempt for this group of vacationing business people is palpably brought home by having the only woman to acknowledge Daria’s presence be the American Indian maid who is cleaning the bedrooms. They are in a sense both invisible women. Daria then goes into a glass box that serves as a modernist stairwell and looks out very much like a caged animal—an image that links her to previous Antonioni heroines such as Monica Vitti in another modernist cage in *The Eclipse*. This re-states one of Antonioni’s principal themes: that Modernism—which was to have liberated



mankind from the heavy ornamentation and repression of the previous century—is simply another kind of trap. Daria comes to the realization that she must leave—obviously emotional rather than ideological—but the two as we have seen from the beginning are intertwined. On the way back to her car she turns to look at the house and in a series of shots from various angles—shot with a telephoto lens—the house blows up. The reverse shot of Daria’s face—looking pleased and at peace—makes it clear that it is some form of wish fulfillment. The exploding modernist house resembles the ideal house in the Sunny Dunes advertising film seen earlier and is in some sense an inversion of the Sunny Dunes Estates advertising film. Moreover I would say that it explodes not simply as the wish fulfillment of Daria but of everyone in the film including the developers themselves—at least subconsciously. This I think is made clear by having various shots repeat, most famously the floating duck in the Sunny Dunes advertising returning as a floating frozen chicken in the blow-up sequence. There are other parallels: the modernist furniture, the fancy refrigerator, the patio furniture that makes its appearance in the advertising short only to be blown up in the set piece that ends the film. The sequence itself is I think the most brilliant Antonioni ever filmed. He takes from Eisenstein ideas of montage as a “collision” of images but develops them along his own path of intellectual despair that would be foreign to Eisenstein’s work. The slow motion film has objects floating dreamily through space to the music of Pink Floyd in a manner that suggests Kubrick’s utopian waltz between a spaceship and an orbiting station in *2001: a Space Odyssey* set to the music of Strauss—but now made absurd by having frozen food and patio furniture floating upward from the force of an explosion. Strauss’ upper class dance music is replaced by Pink Floyd’s democratic drug induced dreaminess. It is impossible to see this footage now without thinking about terrorism and the implications of those explosions in human terms. What Antonioni does is turn them into an absurd ballet of flying meat. It is both painfully horrific and playfully absurd—and it is meant to be. The most iconic shot in this sequence is perhaps the floating bag of Wonder Bread, one of the great shots in Antonioni’s body of work. The exploding television has a man’s face—the proverbial “talking head”. The exploding bookcase filled with books brings the “No Words” theme to its logical endgame.

The “dream” of the sixties (if there can be said to be such a thing) most certainly ends at the Sunny Dunes project but it is not wholly the fault of greedy developers. Daria and Mark share that responsibility as they never make plans, they never express their emotional needs and reservations, they never talk about their ideas, they never speak in anything other than mating clichés that were already clichés in their time. Mark’s inertness is very close to the sleepwalking saints in Bresson’s films but in *Zabriskie Point* his very refusal to have a clearly defined persona—or to put it in entertainment terms—his refusal to do shtick—is his principal characteristic in the film. In short Mark is about this refusal to go along with the program and he takes that refusal to its logical conclusion: suicide. In terms of acting that refusal is expressed with an acerbic shrug that is peculiarly American. We see traces of it in Alan Ladd’s emotional withdrawal in *This Gun for Hire*, in Henry Fonda’s sidelong glances in *The Grapes of Wrath* and in Jack Nicholson’s bitter silences in

*Five Easy Pieces*. It’s a failure to connect. Daria has a more complex relationship to both Sunny Dunes and the man in charge of it. Her hippie demeanor, the hapless search for a commune in the desert that never materializes, the affairs with two very different men who also fail ultimately to connect or mature in any meaningful way express a failure that she herself is unable to articulate. And that is where we come to the fact that their real names and their fictional names are the same. It is no coincidence that in real life Mark Frechette died in prison in 1975 after a failed bank robbery and that Daria Halprin went on to a career as a therapist using dance and movement as forms of healing. Obviously Antonioni understood his actors better than was discerned at the time. The down the road ending of *Zabriskie Point* is a re-staging of Hollywood endings such as Chaplin’s *Modern Times* that rings hollow, even without the absurdly romantic song that is tagged on as a coda during the closing credits, as surely there is nowhere for Daria to go. Antonioni would like to be sympathetic because he believes, like them, that as Ian Macdonald so well put it in his book about the sixties that “...the hippies’ unfashionable perception that we can change the world only by changing ourselves looks in retrospect like a last gasp of the Western soul.”<sup>4</sup> David Lynch understood the intellectual and moral nihilism that is to be found in the West after that last gasp and created his own version of the Western and its discontents in the brilliant *Lost Highway* (1997). For Antonioni in the early 70’s the road would lead to Morocco and Africa and a meeting with Maria Schneider and Jack Nicholson where the ending finally comes out right in perhaps the most brilliant tracking shot in film history in *The Passenger*.

*Zabriskie Point* is a different matter. Antonioni’s film has a dramatic power, an intellectual subtlety and a pictorial intelligence that is sublime and undimmed by the passage of time. The authenticity of the film—enhanced by the difficult acting of the leads—takes hold of the imagination by means of an emotional integrity that is integral to the work as a whole. The film was much maligned upon its release but enough time has passed that many of Antonioni’s perceptive observations associating our corporate consumer culture with repression and violence—that at the time seemed fanciful or morbidly disillusioned—now appear prophetic. It is time to take a new look at Antonioni’s dark vision of American capitalism, the pragmatic architects of its consumer society and an unruly minority of individualists who wanted for a brief moment in time to go in a different direction—all meeting at a crossroads.

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## Notes

- 1 *Antonioni or, the Surface of the World* by Seymour Chatman University of California Press 1985
- 2 Preface to “Six Films”. *The Architecture of Vision* Michelangelo Antonioni
- 3 A Talk With Michelangelo Antonioni and His Work originally seen in *Film Culture Reader* Spring 1962 *The Architecture of Vision* Michelangelo Antonioni
- 4 *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles’ Records and the Sixties*—Ian Macdonald, A Capella Books 2005



## IN REMEMBRANCE

This issue is a commemorative one, celebrating the contribution of artists and critics to the cinema. Being a relatively young art form, it has yet to be appreciated and understood for its full value.

Presently, we live in a culture that is in the process of rapid changes, both aesthetic and technological, promoting the idea that newer is better and the past is disposable. Without diminishing the value of the changes that are taking place and continue to shape the cinema, it should not be at the cost of a past from which it evolved.



TOP: Jane Russell (1921–2011) Robert Mitchum, William Bendix and Jane Russell in *Macao* (1952), a film noir directed by Josef von Sternberg (with non-credited work by Nicholas Ray.) Russell and Mitchum made a well-suited pair as each was witty, playful and sexy.

RIGHT: Patricia Neal (1926–2010) with Gary Cooper in King Vidor's *The Fountainhead* (1949), the film that established Neal as a distinctive screen persona and presence.





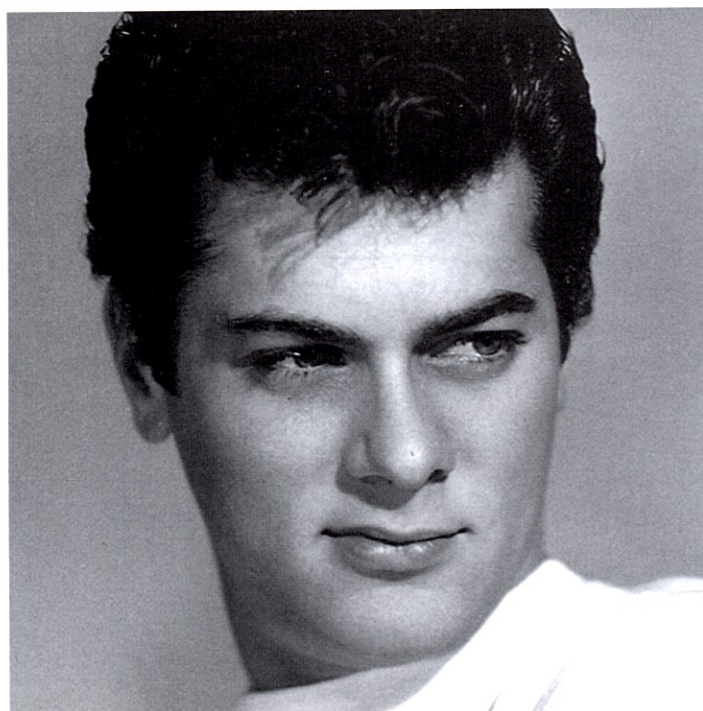
Silent and classical cinemas are often considered primitive and outmoded and the idea that films made in the last century are less significant is a concern. The films, like the artists who created them, deserve recognition for what they have contributed to the culture.

We encourage the ongoing process of documenting and preserving the history of the cinema.

—Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe



TOP: Farley Granger (1925–2011) co-starred with Robert Walker in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). This was Granger's second Hitchcock film, the first being *Rope* (1948). In both films, the director cast Granger in roles that subverted his potential as a romantic hero figure.



LEFT: Tony Curtis (1925–2010) as seen in an early 50s male glamour portrait taken at Universal-International, the studio which put him under contract in 1949.



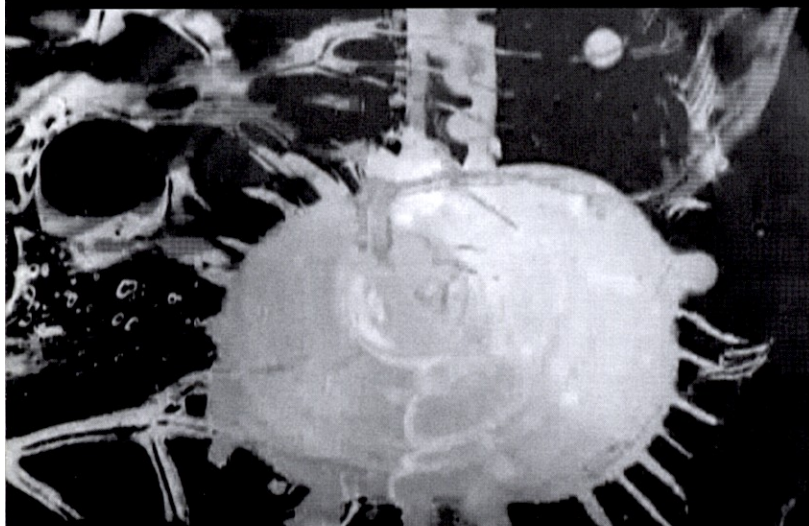


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Nomination deadline for next year:  
June 1, 2011

# Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts 2011



David Rimmer *Digital Psyche*, 2007, 12 min., video



Barbara Sternberg *Beating*, 1995, 64 min., 16mm film

Congratulations to filmmakers David Rimmer and Barbara Sternberg – and to the other 2011 winners: Geneviève Cadieux, Robert Fones, Michael Morris, Kye-Yeon Son, Nancy Tousley and Shirley Wiitasalo.

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